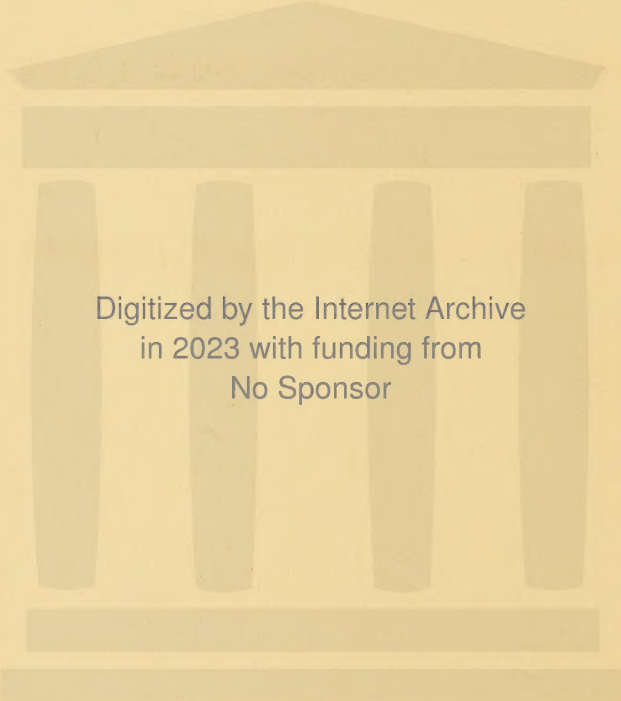




DATE DUE

MY 2 '72

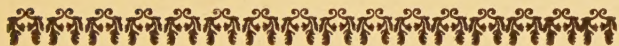
SEP 16 '77



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
No Sponsor



Belinda





HIS *vis-à-vis* WAS A

SUFFICIENT INCITEMENT TO EXCELLENCE



Belinda

A Tale of Affection
in Youth and Age

By HILAIRE BELLOC

*Author of "A Conversation with an Angel," "The
Emerald of Catherine the Great," etc.*

*With Illustrations by
Joe Pye*



DEACCESSIONED

M 500961

Harper & Brothers Publishers

NEW YORK and LONDON

M DCCCC XXIX

B E L I N D A

Copyright, 1929, by Hilaire Belloc

Made in the U. S. A.

First Edition

C-D

•

To

THE EROS OF KEIR



Illustrations

His <i>Vis-à-vis</i> Was a Sufficient Incitement to Excellence	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Close on Noon She Woke	<i>Facing p.</i> 20
In Him, for Her, Approached a God	“ 24
Lawyer Fox, Mysterious and Alarming	“ 70
Horatio Halted His Horse	“ 98
Detain Me Not!	“ 104
Impute It Not to Immodesty in a Tender Virgin	“ 174
“ <i>Zounds!</i> ” Cried the Baronet. “ <i>Tiens!</i> ” Murmured the Marquise	“ 178

Belinda

*Unconquered in battle,
whom once the Paphian bore,
Survivor of the Gods,
remember me,
your chronicler
and friend*


*



BELINDA

A TALE OF AFFECTION
IN YOUTH AND AGE

By Hilaire Belloc

ITHIN the parish, and adjoining the village, of Marlden, in a stately mansion known as The Towers, whose ample lawn sweeps down in smooth luxuriance to the pellucid waters of the River Avon, resided a gentleman respected throughout the County of Wiltshire as Sir Robert Montgomery; for such was, indeed, his name.

The baronet (for such was his rank) enjoyed the esteem of his equals, the respectful affection of his inferiors, and the devotion of an only daughter, an only child, upon whom

BELINDA

her mother (long dead) had bestowed the pleasing name of Belinda.

That devotion the widowed father repaid with a particular and careful attention, the dignity of which could hardly veil his deep, his doting fondness. No expense was spared in providing Belinda's earliest years with a solid grounding in the rudiments of polite learning, while, as her girlhood blossomed into riper charms, a further selection of instructors drawn from both sexes perfected her in Italian, French, the art of painting in water-colours, every department of deportment, and the pianoforte.

Thus did Belinda Montgomery, as she entered her eighteenth year, unite every refinement of culture to beauty of an entrancing mould; a mind naturally apt and generous, trained to its fullest powers, informed a frame of surpassing grace, and the whole was inspired by a soul wherein had been firmly planted the precepts of our sublime religion.

BELINDA

To this last and awful matter the good vicar of the parish, the Reverend John Atkins, had applied himself with constant zeal. His living (of which Sir Robert was patron) did not so completely engross his time as to forbid him the hours required for the young lady's spiritual education nor were the emoluments of such a task ungrateful to one whose humble needs were but narrowly met by the tithe and glebe of the parish.

Under such guidance Belinda grasped in turn the nature and attributes of her Creator, the scheme of the Atonement, the promise of a blessed Heaven, the menace of a dreadful Hell, the original institution of Episcopacy; and the errors of Rome upon the one hand, of Dissent upon the other. The Book of Common Prayer was her constant companion, and on the richly inlaid table of her private boudoir lay open, for daily consultation, the Holy Bible.

Can we marvel that under such auspices the

BELINDA

radiant girl subjected to her sway whatever youths her careful parent permitted to approach her presence? The younger gentry of the county pledged with enthusiasm the queen of grace; their elders sighed that their own generation had known no sight like this. All were dazzled, all succumbed. The good discovered at once their supreme felicity in the influence of so much piety in such a setting, while the wicked were half converted and wholly abashed before so much virtue united to such ennobling beauty.

For, indeed, Belinda, at this her entry into life, was of a peerless loveliness. Her lustrous hair, of a delicate brown in hue, lay smoothly parted over a front of ivory. The perfect oval of her face 'twould need a Raphael to limn, a Petrarch to record. Her eyes, modest yet fearless, shone with the sunlit blue of our northern heavens; her lips, so refined in contour, albeit instinct with health, seemed ever at the point of smiling, but of smiling

BELINDA

gravely: save when some fresh and innocent cause of laughter unbound her spirit. Her carriage was, perhaps, her final quality; for she seemed at once to glide, to float, to advance, to command—and yet to yield. Whether entering a room or leaving it, an equal measure of dignity would attend her action; and whether she sank to repose upon the soft divan or rose to sing some *morceau* of music, the world stood still to admire a presence as signal in the one posture as in the other.

Adjoining the Montgomery estate lay the lands of a family also long connected with Wiltshire, and famous for many generations among the gentry of that county.

Horatio Maltravers, the youthful occupant of these venerable acres, was the last descendant from a long line of squires, one of whom had acted as page to the Virgin Queen, another as equerry to the Third William, while

BELINDA

yet another had served under the orders of General Whitelock in the capacity of ensign.

Halston House (for such was the name of the mansion) stood, a noble but sadly neglected pile, framed in tall elms and spreading oaks whose antiquity in some way hinted at ruin. The very rooks, as they cawed at evening about its crumbling battlements, seemed to mourn the past glories of a family decayed, and the wild grass growing at random on the abandoned sward bore witness to the general decline.

The Towers of the Montgomerys, Halston of the Maltravers, lay each on the banks of this same river Avon, and the parks were so situate that a county road divided them; but on either side of that highway what a contrast! Sir Robert Montgomery's hedges, well trimmed and dense, proclaimed the careful wealth, the public sense, of their lord. Upon these, at the proper season of the year, a line of stout yeomen might be seen chastising with

BELINDA

chopper and bill-hook the over-luxuriance of Nature, and reducing all to an exact design. Opposite, the hedges of Halston ran straggling and thin. Great gaps disfigured their alignment. Rank growths of bush, some already grown to stunted trees, sprang here and there untended; while an unsightly patching of stake, hurdle, and furze completed the disorder.

The passer-by upon his way to Bath, could not but exclaim (as he looked to the left), 'What decency! What exactitude!' Nor again (on turning to the right), could he restrain such expletives as 'Slipshod!' and even 'Disgusting!'

The fields told the same story; on the one hand sat plenitude upon a clean soil, where the tenacious dock, the invading thistle, and the insistent charlock were unknown; on the other was nothing but a starved and weedy misery. The north lodge of The Towers, a small but striking erection in the Gothic man-

BELINDA

ner, was of newly-carven stone, roofed with careful slate and flanked by an ornamental paling; the south lodge of Halston could only be saved the title of hovel by some poor vestige of a former solidity. The cottages on either side of the turnpike proclaimed a similar opposition. From those of Sir Robert smiling faces looked out beneath new and deep thatch over charming groups of brilliant flowers, but from those of Horatio the wizened and anxious features of an uncertain peasantry watched with a sullen suspicion, while the roofs above them, gravely out of repair, matched the damp and blotchy walls of their unhappy tenements.

Yet was not the young owner of this anxious patrimony to blame for its deplorable appearance. Sir Robert himself, though his nearest neighbour, was the first to admit that Horatio was the victim of circumstances rather than of defect. His father, already impoverished by an unfortunate adventure in

BELINDA

china clay, had married, late in life, an Irish lady of some charm but no appreciable dowry. She had died in giving birth to their only son, and the widower had passed some twenty years as a recluse, burying himself in a barren study of the Christian Fathers, and even of the Hebrew language.

His lawyer—and who shall blame him?—had taken full advantage of his client's unpractical disposition. Mortgage had followed mortgage, and compound interest had eaten deeply into the rent roll of Halston. When the aged scholar, not wholly conscious of his disaster, had died (some eighteen months before the opening of this tale), Horatio, then but twenty-three years of age and just returned from the University of Oxford, found himself dependent upon an income which, when all the charges of his dependants and reduced household were met, hardly exceeded five hundred pounds a year.

Upon this he maintained most narrowly the

BELINDA

life to which he had been born. Only the most necessary repairs were met by his legal advisers, who were also his creditors and the controllers of the estate. It was they who paid him quarterly his pittance of guineas, and with this he still contrived, by many a shift and device, and without hope of visiting town or of being active in any public service, to play a very modest part with his equals. He had his horse, his gun; some few friends who would visit his loneliness; and the pitying esteem, rather than the cordial regard of his wealthier neighbours and their wives.

Yet was Horatio Maltravers at this moment well fitted to take on an ample rôle in the society of Wiltshire, had fortune proved less hard. He was above the middle height, well formed and vigorous, if somewhat too lithe in figure. His curled black hair sat admirably upon features pale and touched with melancholy, but noble and illumined by deep

BELINDA

eyes of a dark intensity. His voice was low and full of feeling. Nor could his undeniable attractions be impeached of effeminacy—courteous and elaborate as was his ceremony, and easy and slow as was his gesture—for his mode of life was indeed manly.

He was quick and ready at every exercise native to his rank. His strength was equal to his agility. He was an excellent horseman, and untiring at every sport, whether to follow the fox, mounted, or to run on foot after the hare with a kind of dogs called beagles. He shot with accuracy from a fowling-piece, and (what is to every young man's advantage) was unerring with the pistolet at twenty paces. It is also to the credit of his father that, in spite of his strange, hermit way of life, he had had the boy trained in the art of fencing with the rapier, in which a French refugee, precariously settled in St. Peter's Magna, and driven to Halston and back twice a week in a farmyard cart, had instructed him

BELINDA

for a small fee. This same, a Monsieur de Chabrol, had also perfected him in the French language, which Horatio (though he concealed the talent with some shame) could speak with an excellent accent and an extensive vocabulary.

As may be imagined, Horatio in boyhood had constantly met, as playmate, the young heiress of The Towers. The children, each ignorant of sister or of brother, had formed, unknown to their elders, so warm a friendship as strikes root in later years. Horatio, a freshman at Christchurch College, Oxford, remembered his little companion of fourteen who would welcome him on his return for his first vacation, and was confused to discover that his visits were less warmly welcomed, his invitations to The Towers more rare. Belinda, in her fifteenth and sixteenth years, could not dismiss from her mind the permanent memory of her companion. She pictured him in his University life as some-

BELINDA

thing of a hero, knowing and doing things in a world greater than her own. Horatio, now come to manhood, kept the recollection of Belinda's voice as a furniture of his mind.

Upon Horatio's entering into his estate, Belinda was still in the schoolroom. Upon her return from London, after her presentation at Court, they met in the genteel life of the county, but upon dates far apart, and in the midst of crowds; save when, as courtesy demanded, Sir Robert would upon occasion ask his old neighbour's son to a meal. But he was then careful to seat at the table numerous other guests, nor was Horatio permitted too near an approach to the chief places of the board. If he might beg a dance of her in one house or another and exchange a word in the company of her relative and companion (Miss Hackman), it was his sole intercourse with one who had been, as it were, of his own blood in their childish years.


Less and less frequently did the young

BELINDA

people meet. More and more formal grew their exchanges upon the rare occasions. Yet each retained certain playmate memories, and these, in one moment, the Inexorable Powers were to revive, to transfigure and to inform with flame.



II

INTER had passed; the full trees were heavy with new leaves against the lingering sunsets of June, when Sir Robert Montgomery gave a Ball at his house, in order that Belinda might appear beneath her father's roof as the Queen of Wiltshire society. He was supported in this by a near female relative, a cousin, of austere and resolute presence, whose private means he had often supplemented, for whose worldly judgement he had a high regard, and whom he retained to accompany his daughter and advise him in his affairs.

BELINDA

Miss Hackman (as we have seen to be the lady's name) prepared the noble function in its every detail, and yet found time to suggest, to design, to command the ravishing *toilette* in which the débutante should conquer the admiration of all beholders. It was of a white and gauzy kind, relieved with large blue flowers of artificial construction; and while its ample but tenuous contours enhanced (if that were possible) the lure of her delightful carriage, its hue and cut proclaimed her charming innocence.

The movement of the crowded room, the hum of polite conversation, were halted to silence as the young Hostess appeared. That silence was succeeded by more eager words, till, at a signal from the band (which was conducted by M. Melchior himself), the music of the dance arose in sensuous grandeur and the partners were set for the 'Martaгнаise'. In the third figure of this graceful though foreign measure, the gentlemen, as is

BELINDA

well known, advance in rotation, and next, just touching with uplifted hands the fingers of an opposing member, step for a moment with each lady in order, until the file is exhausted and the manœuvre at an end. It is an occasion when those not partners in the dance yet greet for a moment, and when Beauty may be saluted (though not detained) by each admirer in turn.

Sir Hugh Portly, a man of commanding contours, of excellent lineage, *distingué*, and but lately past his thirtieth year, had been selected for Belinda's partner. He was sensible of the honour conferred. His full but handsome face, dignified by small square whiskers, admitted a restrained emotion; nor was it mere pride in the envy of others that gave his somewhat ample frame a high bearing as he trod with long acquaintance the complicated postures of the first *ritornelle*. His *vis-à-vis* was a sufficient incitement to excellence, and as he *chasséed*, from left to

BELINDA

right, from right to left, he replied with springing step to the more swan-like gestures of the lovely creature before him.

For the mere purpose of mutual configuration in the dance these two were well matched and contrasted; but there are other contrasts, other matchings. The third figure of the 'Martagnaise' was reached, with its light passing, one by one, of partner to new partner down the line. Charles Hawtry, Lord Henry Coat, gentle Mr. Allen, in turn had made their bow and touched the uplifted hand, when, fourth, Horatio Maltravers passed before her in that maze of movement; the fingers of his hand upraised touched hers so delicately upraised in unison, his face met hers without design. She, leaning far back in just that posture which the latest mode demanded of this evolution, saw for one moment fully that dark, melancholy face—but in that same moment her hand, in the turn of the figure, had met some other hand.

BELINDA

The night advanced; the music, with its sedulous, its ceaseless charm, filled and over-filled the heart; and dance succeeding dance through the warm air, charged with swooning flowers, turned, in the minds of the young, that scene to a sort of dreaming. With the advent of the first grey light, the new day into which they dispersed under the silence of the dawn was of another world.

That night, in the long slumber which the eager exercise of youth both earns and enjoys, this mood of something other than all hitherto conceived still flooded the sleeping soul of Belinda. That night a vague but puissant call to nameless but divine adventures, to complete yet exalted satisfaction, echoed in dreams through the answering spirit of Horatio. Nor did the one, nor did the other know in either mood what summoned or what blessed. The influence so shed was general. No object, no person, appeared to either in their dreams. Rather was the whole

BELINDA

creation filled with an ambient expectation of delight, with beatific air.

When, close on noon, the curtain of Belinda's couch was withdrawn by that one of her numerous attendants deputed for this task, she woke, indeed, to the day and place, yet these were changed as though now infused with wonder. At that same hour, in the poor dark-room of ancient panelling where Horatio Maltravers arose once more to his decayed inheritance, it was into a novel scene that his young spirit entered, though every mark on the ruined woodwork, every outline of the trees without, had been his familiars from infancy.

So dreaming in full wakefulness, the girl, moved by what she thought a random, purposeless caprice, wandered under the high sun across the lawn, through the shrubbery and the iron gate, down the long park field and past the elms towards a dense wood of pines; there she proposed to rest awhile in



CLOSE ON NOON+ SHE WOKE

BELINDA

the shade, and commune with a little brook which eddied clear under a plank thrown across its waters, and ran with a happy murmur to join the Avon near at hand. The stream formed part of the boundary which divided the Maltravers' from the Montgomery's land, and though mere chance and whim had turned her feet towards that spot, some faint connexion of name and person mixed with it.

Upon the farther bank, in the neighbouring park from which the stream divided her, a sandy slope covered with high fern, led up by a narrow path between tall growths of bracken to a great grove which hid the old and ruinous house of Halston beyond. Thence, at that same hour, with high noon past and the more powerful sun distilling every savour from grass and leaf and earth, Horatio sauntered out, bound no whither, filled with the power of summer which grew to harvest all around, and still possessed by

BELINDA

that strange mood of glamour and of change. The grove summoned him to its recesses; he received the influence of the great beeches and their shade as though the half darkness were alive. He came out into the further blinding light, and the sound of the stream below beckoned him insensibly down the path to the water between the wealths of fern.

She saw him as he came through the bracken, with active carriage, with uplifted face. It seemed to her that there was something there inspired; and her imagination put courage and adventure into his advance, as though he were setting out upon a quest. He turned a corner of the path to cross the rustic bridge, and was aware of one scarcely known yet deeply known, whose airy figure among the solemn pines arrested all his being. When he had approached and discovered her face, it was not the familiar feature of a

BELINDA

friend, but Radiance personate. In him, for her, approached a god.

The moment was magical. It was as though some music had transformed the world.

Breast deep in fern, the small and laughing fauns, who love the awakening of life, hid tiptoe, sidling, peeping, benevolent; but in the heart of the high wood a Presence, shining in a shaft of light, triumphantly let fly the arrow from the bow.

* * * *

They had passed through the high wood, side by side, saying but very little, not daring to touch each other's hands, when they saw before them, as they slowly paced, the figure of a woman.

She was standing by the fence of the open park field with the elms beyond, as though awaiting some one; as they approached her they discovered in her a strange majesty of

BELINDA

mien which was the more intriguing from the simplicity of her garments. Indeed, by her dress she seemed to betray a belated attachment to the modes once fashionable at the Court of Bonaparte. For her gown was of one saffron piece, caught at the shoulder with one brooch of gold, and zoned loosely at the breast. Nor was her head covered, but a noble diadem of hair, a tawny gold, crowned her low forehead and her level brows: her features had a repose at once regal and serene, but her eyes shone upon the pair with a sort of claim and (it might almost appear) of affection.

‘Have you seen,’ she said, addressing them first in a deep melodious voice and an accent hardly foreign, ‘Pray, have you seen my Boy as you came through the wood? He wandered there with a bow and arrows for his sport, and I expect his return.’

‘We saw no one, Ma’am,’ answered Ho-



IN HIM, FOR HER,
— APPROACHED A GOD

BELINDA

ratio, with a respect which her carriage demanded. 'Shall we seek him for you?'

'Nay,' said the Lady, now turning upon Belinda a glance which was benignant and which nearly smiled; 'he will soon return, and I myself will saunter on to meet him there.'

With that she bowed very slightly and passed them. After a little advance they turned their heads discreetly to observe what way she took; but she had disappeared, and they thought that the neighbouring trees of the high wood must have hidden her from their sight.

'She must have been some stranger, lodging for a holiday in the village,' said Belinda. 'And come out a-strolling from near by. How pleasing, how arresting, was her demeanour! I shall hope to know her.'

'She may have been French or Italian, I think,' rejoined Horatio. 'Or an English-woman who has lived abroad; for I thought

BELINDA

I perceived some touch of another manner in her speech.'

'It may be so,' answered Belinda, 'and I am glad we found her. My father indulgently permits the public to take their pleasure in the park, so long as they abstain from damaging the shrubs and fences, and are careful to shut after them the gates through which they pass.'

'It is consonant, indeed,' exclaimed Horatio, 'with his noble and generous nature, and had I the fortune to stand to him in any intimate relation, I should think myself fortunate to admire and revere more closely a character of such charity and wisdom.'

'You are right,' replied Belinda, with a grateful look. 'He has ever shown me from my first recollection a constant and devoted affection, a care for my every wish, which has inspired me with the most ardent and respectful devotion in return.'

'We have been set—you have been set—

BELINDA

in happy places indeed,' said Horatio in a lowered voice. 'These scenes in which we have both grown up from childhood, these fertile vales, these clear brooks, these miles of forest, these rocky and abrupt but majestic hills, are one in my heart with that society which inhabits them, and with which they are now inextricably mingled in my heart.'

'Your words,' she answered in tones still more subdued, and thrilling with the fullness of her mood, 'express the inmost thoughts of my being . . .'

Even as she spoke there was heard from a cupola of green copper above the stables the clear tones of a bell. Belinda, startled as from a profound and pleasant dream, said hurriedly: 'Ah! I must hasten my return! Yonder bell marks that hour when my father is accustomed to drink a glass of sherry wine with his steward (who is thus summoned), to give orders for his estate and to receive

BELINDA

reports upon it daily. This business done, he is pleased to have me with him, alone. We arrange the order of the house, the entertainment of the morrow, the names and places of our guests; all which concluded, I play for him some favourite *morceau*. It is for me a sacred hour.'

'I will accompany you,' returned Horatio, 'no farther than the iron gate at the entrance of the shrubbery. Permit me to remain, till then, at your side.'


The distance to be traversed was but a quarter of a mile. He strode with ease beside her somewhat accelerated steps. Each knew that on the morrow in the high noon the one and the other would be by the stream again. Neither looked at the other. Neither spoke. For such we are in youth—which is the heaven of our days. But when they came to the iron gate, and must part, she halted, turned, and lifted, or half lifted, her right hand from her side. He dared for one mo-

BELINDA

ment to touch it. They looked into each other's eyes, and the world was changed. He wheeled round, and was gone. In the cool shade of the arching greenery as she hurried towards the sunlit grass and the great house beyond, the air, her soul, was music, and all her being had entered beatitude.



III

 ELINDA hastily sought her father's study, where she found the Baronet standing at the central table, having before him a glass of brown sherry and three biscuits, of which refreshment it was his custom to partake at this hour of the day. Beside him stood Mr. Carter, the steward, with whom he had been conferring upon the affairs of his estate. The latter he dismissed upon the entry of his daughter, who reminded him with a charming smile that it was time for the daily perusal of the household books and for taking

BELINDA

his pleasure upon the ordering of dinner and the arrangement of guests.

Now that they were alone Sir Robert, looking upon her with some sadness and solemnity, motioned her to a *fauteuil*, into which the graceful creature sank with outward ease, but disturbed by an inward trepidation; for her father's gaze, as he stood there above her, had in it something at once so grave, so affectionate, and so mournful, as to warn her of a momentous communication.

He maintained this posture for a short while, still keeping fixed upon her his profound reflection, before which she cast her own eyes downwards, timorously awaiting his first words. Not until he had consumed his slight repast did he sigh heavily, and, sitting down beside her, take her hand with an affection and a sort of hesitation which deeply moved her.

'My dear,' he said, '(how dear you will

BELINDA

never know, for it is not in the designs of Providence to communicate to children the devotion of their parents), I have to speak to you to-day upon a matter which will decide your whole life.'

Already Belinda trembled, for a deep instinct, young as she was, informed that her father was approaching the subject of marriage.

The Baronet continued:

'You are my only child. You will inherit this place, my considerable fortune, and my name—for I propose that this shall, by some arrangement, be preserved. All is at my undisputed disposal, and all (need I say it?) will be yours, and yours alone. I must tell you more. . . . I design that upon your' (here was Belinda's trepidation almost openly apparent) ' . . . your . . . your departure from beneath my roof for the house of another, a very substantial part of all my realizable wealth shall accompany you as

BELINDA

your dower. Moreover,' he pursued in firmer tones, 'I have made, upon legal advice, such arrangements as shall preserve these moneys for yourself or whatever posterity' (Belinda blushed) 'it may please Heaven to grant you. No one,' he added, with a rising voice, 'but shall feel the honour and emolument of an alliance with the Montgomerys of Marlden; but no one shall imagine that its independent heritage is merged by marriage with his own.'

Indeed, at the thought of such an indignity, the Squire's manly voice was affected, and he paused, while Belinda, who had recovered for the moment a full control of herself, awaited his fateful words.

'I have made it a principle,' he continued, as he released her hand, and rising, slowly paced the floor before her, 'I have made it a principle never to coerce the young in matters of the heart. Do not imagine,' and here he halted, the better to emphasize his words,

BELINDA

'that I could for one instant dictate to your inmost and most sacred feelings or even attempt to deflect your choice by so much as a hairsbreadth. But my knowledge of the world, and,' here he cleared his throat, 'my paternal position, make it incumbent upon me that I should at least tender advice to one upon whom centre all my hopes, and whose future welfare is my only concern. My dear,' and here he sat down beside her again, and again took her hand, 'among the multitude who naturally aspire to your alliance, you must have noticed some few more attentive than the rest—perhaps some *one* more devoted, more assiduous. His laudable ambition has not escaped me; he is our neighbour: he has, like ourselves, an honourable place in the county: his father was my friend. I am his own elder friend, I hope, to this day. His worldly position may not be quite equal to my own, but I value such things as dust when I compare them with a chivalric tem-

BELINDA

per, a manly poise and a manifest devotion to his intended course.'

The image of Horatio rose before Belinda's mind. She lifted her eyes to Heaven with a happy sigh half formed, when her incipient ecstasy was shattered by these awful words:

'I refer to Sir Henry Portly.'

At that name the young lady looked suddenly up in a startled dread, uncertain fashion—like one wakened from sleep by fire—and cried aloud:

'Oh! My father! Oh! papa! Do not force upon me a man whom my whole being rejects with an unspeakable loathing! One whose very presence is repulsive. Whose person . . .' she looked wildly about her, and immediately buried her head in her hands.

Sir Robert halted in his stride. His features passed from an expression of bewilder-

BELINDA

ment to one of amazement, and at last to stern reproof.

‘Your words are strangely chosen,’ he said at last, in cold tones. ‘They have an insane sound in my ears, Belinda.’ (So rarely did her devoted parent use her full name that its sound appalled her.) ‘You talk of this worthy, this excellent young man in terms unfit for your lips, for our common position, and for his own character; terms wholly unworthy of my simple reference to his claims. Happily your extravagant outburst is known to none save myself . . . But,’ he continued more softly, ‘my dear child, if, indeed, for some extraordinary reason you feel thus about a young and gallant neighbour of unexceptionable position, I shall be the last to press you. I will leave time to paint his character in its proper light, and the return of sober sense to aid your judgement. I certainly desire you to consider the alliance—to consider it seriously. It would, indeed, fulfil my

BELINDA

wishes; but if another among those whom I am so proud to discover as your admirers has moved you more nearly, I would not disturb your ultimate decision. You have no lack of choice; and when, of several, you shall tell me that you prefer the prospect of this alliance or that, I will consider it most tenderly—believe me!’

These words so encouraged the poor girl that she was moved to stammer:

‘It is not that . . . It is not that! . . . My word is plighted!’

‘Your word is plighted?’ gasped the Baronet. ‘Are these terms in which a respectable female . . .’

He halted, choked in utterance.

Belinda, the unfortunate Belinda, could only whisper, as her face sank into her hands:

‘It is Horatio!’

There was a silence, during which Sir Robert stood like a statue, with right foot advanced, left refused; his lips pressed into a

BELINDA

grim decision, his eyes staring. At last it broke.

'Horatio!' he thundered. 'Horatio Maltravers? A beggar's brat, disreputably dragged up by a hermit? A pauper? A young beggar? An out-at-elbows fellow, a scrap and rag-bag, a rotten Oxford coxcomb all curls and debts, a miserable futility whose . . .'

But his indignation was interrupted by a lamentable scream. Belinda had slipped from her seat and lay in a swoon upon the Aubusson carpet; her arms sank impotent beside her; her lovely face—as pale as death and with closed eyes—reclining upon the circle of ballooning skirts which enfolded her frame and decently covered her small and exquisitely modelled feet.

At such a sight the wretched father sprang back, transfixed with horror. He struck his forehead with his palm, stood for a moment speechless; then, leaping forward, pulled both bells on either side of the marble fire-

BELINDA

place with frenzied violence, and rushing to the door, which he tore open, shouted:

'Dodgson! Carter! Mrs. Hales! Joseph! Dorothy! Jane! Mary! Jackson! Henry! Emily! the boy! All the rest of you! Come quick! All of you! Miss Belinda . . .!'

The sound of hurrying feet filled the recesses of the mansion, a crowd of domestics gathered, Belinda's maid, Harrison, and Caroline, her private attendant, had the office of lifting the tender form towards the sofa, while the housekeeper advised the loosening of the young lady's garments, the burning of feathers under her nose, and even the respectful dashing of cold water over her face, an extreme remedy which happily needed not to be applied.

For Belinda languidly opened her beautiful eyes, and to the unspeakable relief of her distracted parent, murmured a whispered word just at the moment when Miss Hackman, who had entered later than the rest,

BELINDA

with dignified reserve, and kept somewhat apart from the hubbub, prepared to take charge.

Sir Robert knelt at the sofa, fondling his daughter's hands and calling her by her tenderest names of childhood; once more she opened her eyes and wanly smiling at him, whispered, 'Dear papa!' whereat tears filled the Baronet's eyes and a suppressed sob confused his utterance.

But here Miss Hackman gave orders that the men-servants should take up the sofa as it was, bearing its divine burden, and carry it up bodily to Belinda's room, herself superintending the difficult task, and only returning when it was accomplished and her cousin left in charge of the maid, to find Sir Robert seated at his desk with his head in his hands, consumed by a grievous emotion.

'I beg you, Robert,' said that lady, not without *sécheresse*, 'not to exaggerate this trifling

BELINDA

incident. All is well with the child. It was but a passing humour.'

'I fear . . .' began her cousin in reply—he was about to add 'that I was the cause of . . .' but he reconsidered his intention and was wisely silent.

'Such little passages are common enough in girls of Belinda's age,' continued the lady. 'I myself was never subject to them, as you know: *our* family is, I thank Heaven, exceptionally robust. But I have seen all this too often in others to make any affair of it. Believe me, by to-morrow she will be herself again, and within a week she will have forgotten all about it.'

'You are right, my dear Claudia,' answered Sir Robert, with affected cheerfulness. 'The truth is that nothing disturbs me save the fact that you and I must go to London by to-morrow's coach at the latest on the business of Lady Gordooly's legacy, which will not brook delay. We cannot be returned for a fort-

BELINDA

night at the earliest. So long an absence gives me some slight anxiety. I am loath to leave the child in doubtful health, and alone with domestics.'

'Rest assured,' replied Miss Hackman calmly. 'You have often heard me speak of my friendship and regard for an excellent gentlewoman (now in decayed circumstances) residing in Bath and by name Curll, for whom I have often done some small favour. She, I am sure, will be delighted to come here at no charge, sufficiently pleased to enjoy a change of air, an abundant board and all the amenities of this ample establishment: not to speak of the gratitude she rightly feels towards myself. She can be summoned upon the instant. I will answer for her competence and devotion. She will take every care of Belinda till our return, and I shall even command the domestics to take her orders, so that our dear child may be

BELINDA

relieved of such cares as household books and meals.'

'I am indeed obliged to you,' replied her cousin, with sincere good feeling. 'I admire your prompt and useful decision, and I thank you for it. She shall be warned this evening, if you will be good enough to couch the missive. A carriage shall fetch her early in the morning, and she shall be installed before our departure.'

Miss Hackman, full of her scheme, departed to her own boudoir in the north wing to compose the letter to her dependant. Her cousin took the opportunity of her absence to mount immediately to his daughter's room, where he was received with all the eagerness of affectionate regard by the reclining invalid.

Belinda had just refreshed her strength with a bowl of soup and a glass of port wine, brought with respectful deference by her particular attendant. The latter he dismissed,

BELINDA

desiring a private conversation; the former he again took lovingly by the hand, as he seated himself on a chair at her side.

'My dear,' he said, after something of a pause. 'My darling child, the words I used caused in you a perturbation which I did not for a moment intend and which, believe me, I deplore. Your confidence was unexpected. Its purport took me by surprise.' Here he hesitated for some second, choosing his words.

'You must not think I am insensible to early affection' (and here he touched her hair) 'nor imagine that the passage of so many years has made me quite forget the natural effects of youth . . . My whole, my only object, is your welfare . . .' He paused again, desirous above all things, not to arouse her from her now calmer mood. Then, somewhat abruptly, he added: 'Your cousin and I—as you perhaps remember—must leave for London to-morrow afternoon by the coach.

BELINDA

The business, which is of a financial nature and concerns our family, is peremptory. We can neither of us be excused.'

'Fear nothing, dearest papa,' answered Belinda, in a voice stronger than he had expected. 'My circulation is already restored. I shall be myself again before your return.'

'Yes, yes,' said the Baronet. 'I am sure of that . . . Meanwhile, however, during the fortnight of our absence, I should, indeed, be anxious if I did not know that you were well cared for . . . A friend of our cousin, a lady whose name you have heard and whom, perhaps, you have met, a Miss Curll of Bath, in whom she has complete confidence, shall be here to afford you companionship, and to relieve you from the petty affairs of the household during the next few days. She will in no way interfere with you, my dearest child, and her presence will greatly relieve me.'

'I am sure,' replied his daughter, 'that I

BELINDA

shall like her very much, and your kindness is more, alas! than I deserve.' She sighed, and her father's eagerness to reassure and comfort her rose at that slight expression of her care.

'I have told you,' he said, 'that I know—I understand—the affections of youth . . . I married late: you have a father too much advanced in years for your opening life. Your mother, who is now a saint in Heaven, you never knew. But I myself, long before your age, had among my companions one to whom the deepest of human feelings was far, far from unknown.'

He said no more, but in a little while, continued in a different voice:

'If—and can I doubt it?—this attachment is, for the moment, so strong in you, I will not—' she half rose, and would have spoken, eagerly, but he lifted his hand, 'I will not *wholly* forbid its expression. I am no tyrant . . . God knows! But I owe it to you

BELINDA

who are innocent of the world and the effect of time, to make conditions. These conditions I have, in the main, delivered. You must agree with me the future will show it—that they are wise and wholly for your good. I must make trial. I shall myself—this very night—send word to young Maltravers, telling him that if in a certain delay your mutual purpose still stands, I shall require of him, as a condition of my consent that he enter a profession—though it be but that of a soldier—the purchase of a commission I could facilitate. I should prefer a career in which he may gain an honourable independence. I can by my influence secure him a minor post in Mr. Aldwin's bank, where his capacity for regular work could be tested and his prospects, if he prove industrious, secured. When the required delay is exhausted, if his intentions prove firm under the ordeal, I must—I will—reluctantly,

BELINDA

I confess—admit the prospect of such a union.'

'Oh, papa!' cried the enraptured girl, her face flushed with joy, 'You are too good. I long . . .'

He interrupted her.

'My dear,' he continued, 'the effects of time are stronger than your young heart can gauge. The trial may be too rude; your judgement of him fallible: my own more just. But if he show the manly purpose such an ordeal demands, and if you both, after a sufficient experience and attention, persist in your mutual purpose—why, I shall say that you have reached a well-considered conclusion, and that Horatio, by his *industry*, will merit my esteem, by his increasing *income*, my respect.

'Meanwhile there is yet one more condition which is essential, and on which you shall not move me. You may correspond: you must not meet . . . as yet.'

BELINDA

'Alas! Alas!' cried Belinda, dissolving (to her father's alarm) into tears. 'I should have told you! I am a wicked, ungrateful child! . . . No later than to-morrow noon, by the stream again, under the pine trees, Horatio and I were to find each other, and I . . .'

'Do not be disturbed,' answered her father promptly. 'Even had I not decided as I have, your health forbids. I shall send a note to the boy myself to-night. I will tell him precisely how my decision in this matter stands: as for to-morrow, I will say that your indisposition forbids your leaving the house. Later, when we are gone, you are free to write to him, if you will, and he to reply. But I repose my confidence in you that you will not disappoint me, and that you will not meet him during my brief absence.'

He embraced her fondly; she returned that embrace with grateful and intense feeling. Her happiness had returned—for was not such love as hers and Horatio's eternal?



IV



HE Baronet went back to his study in a mixed mood, and told the maid, who had waited upon the landing without, to return to her mistress.

Seated at his desk, Sir Robert Montgomery took pen, wafer, sand, and paper, heaved a deep sigh, and began to write as follows:

‘Sir,—’

Long did he ponder this word, considering all that lay beneath so stern an opening; then,

BELINDA

slowly, he crumpled the paper, threw it into the basket, and began once more:

‘My dear Horatio—’

Here he rested his chin upon his hand and raised his eyes to the ceiling, in which attitude he remained, considering all that lay beneath so affectionate, or at least, so familiar an address. Still more slowly his right hand sought the sheet which once again he crumpled into a ball, and hurled into the receptacle at his side.

Then, abandoning further delay, he wrote rapidly and with a fixed determination:

‘Mr. Maltravers,

‘My daughter has communicated to me information which I should have preferred to have been better prepared for. I confess my surprise that you did not approach me before paying her the addresses of

BELINDA

which I now learn for the first time: upon the very eve of a necessary departure for London, where business will detain me for a fortnight or more. Upon my return, I will consider your claims: I shall not, I cannot, be indifferent to my daughter's feelings upon the one hand, nor, on the other, to my own opinion (after the experience of a long life) upon the imprudence of rash engagements. I shall beg of you to inform me upon your prospects—especially of a professional income—your approach to which shall not find me unsympathetic, but in the absence of which, I warn you, the prospect of such an alliance as you aspire to would be remote indeed. You have known each other from childhood; occasional correspondence is native to you both; I hesitate to forbid it in my absence, for its interruption would seem to both of you at once harsh and unfamiliar. But I strictly charge you that on no

BELINDA

account are you, during that absence, to approach my house or make any appointment for meeting. My daughter has dutifully pledged me her word to the same effect, and, indeed, the state of her health is, for the moment, such that her medical adviser enjoins complete repose. Send no reply to this injunction. It would be useless, for I shall be gone before your answer could arrive. On my return, with which I will immediately acquaint you, I hope you will honour me with your presence at Marlden Towers, that we may discuss in full the matters I have put before you.'

The rapid pen here paused; he added—alas! he added—these fateful words:

'Whether her present mood shall endure is a matter for time to test: I am old enough to know that things which seem

BELINDA

eternal at her age and yours may be a matter of weeks, or days, or even hours.'

With that he abruptly ceased, and signed:

'Your very obedient Servant to command,
'Robert Montgomery.'

This message he folded with care, after his usual fashion, in three creases. And, not content with the informal wafer, he imposed upon red wax his seal, with the arms of the Marlden Montgomerys—or Mumries, as they were then called—granted under a patent of William and Mary: three dolphins, gules, natant upon argent under a pale proper with the crest a pheasant branchee and the device: *Habet.*

He rang; he ordered the enclosure to be delivered at once by hand, with the message that the bearer did not await an answer. He turned to another and yet more difficult task.

BELINDA

With no hesitation on his form of address, but with far more deliberation in the construction of his phrases, he composed a letter which the reader shall now peruse:

'My dear Sir Henry,

'After the conversation you were good enough to accord me, but Tuesday last, upon the suit which you desired me to permit you to present to my daughter, I should be treating you ill indeed, if I were to conceal from you a circumstance which has—in my view—modified that simple course which, as you know, I welcomed and approved. To be plain—and brief—I find upon the eve of my departure for London, that another—I need not fear to name him the son of my late neighbour, 'Hermit' Maltravers, a playmate of her earliest childhood, has made some impression upon Belinda's inclination. She and he were children together. I suspected nothing more

BELINDA

than an old and warm friendship. For the moment they feel—or fancy they feel—a stronger tie.

‘It is my duty to add that if her decision proves fixed and permanent, I should deem it a fatal lack of judgement to oppose a too prolonged refusal.

‘I am distressed. I am somewhat at a loss. I write to you in the knowledge that, during my absence (her health confines her to the house), a man of your honour will respect her indecision. I leave her under the care of a Miss Curll of Bath, an elderly gentlewoman in whom I have full confidence, and who will reside temporarily in my house. In a fortnight I shall be returned, and the whole matter shall be laid before you.

‘It is possible, it is even probable, that this infatuation will pass, and that an alliance, *which you know I should have preferred*, may crown those wishes with

BELINDA

the expression of which you honoured me but a few days since.

‘I am,

‘Your old and devoted friend,

‘Robert Montgomery.’

This last letter the Baronet dispatched as he had the first, immediately, and by hand; sending word at the same time that no answer could reach him until his return from London. The messenger, a well-mounted groom, rode through the darkness which had already fallen, towards that stately mansion, some seven miles distant, the ancestral home of the Portlys.



V



THE Scene has changed.

We are now before those gloomy but impressive gates which are the castellated portals of the Portlys. For near three generations that family had inhabited the towering pile which Mr. Portly of Cheapside, the grandfather of the reigning squire, had erected, his father amplified, and himself inherited at the early age of twenty-three; some eight years before the date of this narrative.

The mansion—known as Molcombe Abbey, from a ruined wall at the end of the kitchen garden, reputed to be a monastic

BELINDA

relic—was in the Palladian order of architecture, but rising to no less than four stories and crowned by a tower of formidable dimensions, from which floated, when its owner was in residence, a flag bearing the Emblems of his Race.

The mounted messenger, approaching it through the evening, saw no more than the vast outline of this noble pile. The reader is more privileged. He may penetrate its massive walls and observe its occupant. Reclining at his ease upon an ancient canopied Dais of Tudor workmanship, the Master of the House mused over a vast fire of oaken logs, which illumined the panelled walls and fitfully revealed the soaring roof of his Hall.

He and his great inheritance seemed, in that setting, to lack nothing but the presence of some young *Chatelaine* worthy of the magnificent surroundings. Numerous suits of armour, panoplies of ancient weapons, many a dark canvas from the brush of more than

BELINDA

one great master, adorned the walls. Rare porcelains and bronzes were dispersed in profusion, while a chandelier, saved from the sack of Chantilly, swung before a carved mantelpiece of the most elegant design.

From this splendid apartment a suite of not less gorgeous rooms could be perceived through the half-opened doors, the first in the manner of Louis Quinze, the next after the style put into fashion not so long ago by the Regent himself at the Pavillon; and beyond, again, a library, on the shelves of which were ranged the flights of genius, from the classic pages of Cicero and Virgil to the masterpieces of Scott and Alison. The whole combined to produce an effect of wealth and splendour which might have been envied by the highest in the land.

But this princely habitation was a deception to the visitor, a mockery to the embittered tenant of its glories. The apparent master of such treasures was in verity no

BELINDA

more than a dependant; all was now abandoned as security to men of whose very names the ruined Henry Portly was uncertain, but who acted through Lawyer Fox, of Bath, himself a partner in the money-lending venture, and (so far as the only documents discovered to Sir Henry could show) the sole mortgagee of those vast estates and of that palatial residence, with all that it contained.

A personal allowance, not ungenerous, but galling and precarious, was secretly advanced to Sir Henry Portly, on condition that he should permanently reside upon the premises; for it was the conviction of the lenders that the maintenance of a certain pomp enhanced the value of their security. The wages of a considerable household were provided with equal secrecy by a monthly payment which this agent (or principal), Lawyer Fox, regularly made to the Baronet, after a full inspection of books, every farthing in which was closely examined and controlled.

BELINDA

Little did the obsequious servants and tenants of Molcombe Abbey imagine, when the humble attorney paid his punctual monthly visit, that the roles were reversed: that the great gentleman inwardly trembled lest he should hear the fatal decision which might at any moment drive him from his roof, while the rusty solicitor exulted in an unlimited power over all around.

This lamentable situation had arisen from an action only too common upon the part of our gentry. Sir Henry's father had had the fatal imprudence to speculate on 'Change.

It was at the moment when the fate of Europe hung in the balance, when the Corsican adventurer had broken loose from Elba, and all England was in an agony of expectation to learn the event of the decisive action to be determined on the plains of Flanders.

The rumour spread by Herr Meyer—later and better known as the Baron de Rothschild

BELINDA

—that the glory of Britain had set on the field of Waterloo, had led Sir Orlando (for such was his name) to sell three per cents. upon account, in the hope of reaping an immense profit when all should be acquainted with the fatal truth. He had not allowed for the business acumen of the great banker. For Meyer-Rothschild had secretly procured the news of *victory* in advance of all, and had had the admirable foresight to spread accounts of *defeat* for the better preparation of the market.

It was upon these accounts that Sir Orlando had speculated in London, confident in the ruin of our cause. But within forty-eight hours it was known that the Iron Duke, despite the blunders of Blucher and the cowardice of the wretched foreigners under his own command, had driven in headlong flight the insolent usurper from the field of Waterloo. The three per cents. enjoyed an immediate and extraordinary rise in value, and

BELINDA

livery, approached with a salver of massive silver in his hand, bearing a sealed *pli*, which he presented, with a low bow, to the master of the Abbey. It was Sir Robert's letter.

Sir Henry opened it—devoured its contents, grasped his peril in a flash, and immediately, with a rapidity worthy of a Cæsar or a Duke of York, he had come to a decision.

With dreadful menaces against delay, he ordered his fleetest steed, Corsair, to be saddled in burning haste, and was galloping furiously down the Bath Road within ten minutes of receiving the fateful news. Alas! that such qualities of intelligence and will should be allied to so unscrupulous a morale: yet such is, indeed, too often the case!

Leaping from his foaming steed in the streets of Bath, at the door of the solicitor's office, he flung the bridle to a passing suppliant, hammered upon the door with his whip-handle, and was at once admitted.

He found Lawyer Fox seated at his desk,

BELINDA

perusing, by the light of two candles, dusty documents tied in red tape, each of which doubtless stood for the ruin of the widow and the orphan.

With not a moment's delay the Baronet poured his tale into the ear of the attorney, whose sallow aquiline features, brilliant dark eye, compressed lip and pointed chin, all marked his concentrated attention.

'There is not a moment to be lost,' cried Sir Henry in conclusion. 'You know this woman Curll?'

'I do,' answered the Lawyer, in firm but quiet tones. He lifted his spare, black-clad figure from the chair, pulled open a high drawer marked with the letter 'C', and drew from its recesses an endorsed file wherein were noted the occupation, age, character, and circumstances of that spinster. There were few, indeed, in all Bath and the surrounding district whom Mr. Fox could not thus refer to and determine.

BELINDA

'Seek her at once!' the Baronet continued abruptly. 'It is your interest as much as mine.'

'More so,' interjected his creditor drily.

'See to it that she shall be our agent!'

'Mine,' murmured Mr. Fox.

'And that this wretched accident shall come to nothing. Quick! I repeat—there is not an hour to be lost! No one knows better how to act than you! I leave it in your hands.'

The attorney smiled in sinister fashion at the compliment, and taking an ample dark cloak which it was his custom to wrap about his form when engaged on his most secret errands, and a soft broad hat of the same sombre hue, which almost hid his features, he accompanied his client from the room to the street.

He chuckled to himself in mirthless irony as the younger man tossed a guinea to the poor wretch who had held his mount, and set off on his return to Molcombe. The law-

BELINDA

yer hearkened a moment to the diminishing sound of the horse's hoofs as they receded in the distance, then, his powerful but evil mind charged with a plan of appalling wickedness, he hurried through the night towards the Crescent, where Miss Curll maintained her meagre *ménage*.

For now some hours that gentlewoman had received and ruminated upon the missive of her benefactress. Her neat but impoverished raiment, the embittered expression upon her pinched features, her very ringlets hanging scarce and grey upon either side of her gaunt face, betrayed her intimate emotion. She dared not neglect what was, indeed, a command, but she had noted with a sarcastic smile the absence of any mention of emolument, and she was considering that the brief morning hours before the arrival of the chaise from The Towers would not even give her the opportunity to find a tenant for her two poorly-furnished rooms during her ab-

BELINDA

sence. As is too frequently the case with deeds of benevolence, those of Miss Hackman had awakened no gratitude in the restricted breast of her dependant; and although but last Christmas she had received a gift of game and a bottle of Madeira wine from her superior and friend, she seemed to regard such munificence as less than her due.

She had already arrived at the conclusion to work upon Belinda's young and more impulsive nature, in order to obtain a handsome gratuity at their parting, when, with a sharp rap at the door, ushered in by the charity girl who was Miss Curll's sole attendant, Mr. Fox appeared—presenting, in his dark cloak muffled about his mouth and caught over his extended arm, a figure mysterious and alarming.

He bowed upon his entry, took the chair presented him, thrust his sombrero into the folds of his black garment, and fixed his brilliant eyes upon the gentlewoman with a

LAWYER FOX

MYSTERIOUS
& ALARMING

JOE PYE

BELINDA

gaze the intensity of which disconcerted her and compelled her to cast her glance to the floor.

‘Madam,’ he said at length, ‘I will be brief—and to the purpose. You are engaged to act as companion for some little time to Miss Montgomery at Marlden Towers.’

The unfortunate lady made a gesture as though to reply, when he interrupted her and continued:

‘All is known to me. I approach you only for your own advantage—and, indeed, that of your employers.’

At the word ‘employers’ a faint flush, which did not escape her visitor, rose to this unfortunate lady’s cheek-bones. She repressed a protest and heard him out.

‘This young lady—you may have heard it—or you may not—is pursued by the unwelcome attentions . . .’

‘Whether they are unwelcome or not,’ Miss Curll took courage to interrupt, ‘it is not

BELINDA

mine to judge. I am informed of the situation. I know the gentleman's name. . . . I . . .'

'Madam—they must not meet.'

'Sir!' answered Miss Curll with some hauteur, 'I do not take orders from you! You forget yourself. . . . Moreover' (she added, as she noted a certain expression upon his lips), 'I may tell you that such a contingency does not arise. The young people are already pledged to such conduct as you advise. Indeed, my charge, Miss Montgomery, has promised her father that, during his absence, there shall be no meeting between herself and young Mr. Maltravers.'

'It is well,' answered Mr. Fox briefly—and here he leant forward in an impressive manner and lowered his voice. 'But there is more. They are not to correspond.'

'Really, sir ——' began Miss Curll, with rising tones, when she noticed that the hand of the lawyer had laid firmly upon the table,

BELINDA

concealed, or half-concealed, a banknote of an unknown denomination. Her colour came and went, she clasped her mittened hands, and nervously intertwined her fingers.

'They are permitted to correspond,' she almost whispered, 'at least, if I understand. . . .'

'Madam,' broke in the Attorney, 'you have read wrong. It is to the interest of all—and of none more than of the young lady herself—that no letters should pass.'

With that he permitted so much of the note to be seen as disclosed the enormous sum of twenty-five pounds.

'Would you bribe me, sir?' cried Miss Curll, in haughty and louder tones.

'Such was my intention,' answered the lawyer cynically; 'if indeed,' he added hastily, 'any possibility of bribery were in question. . . . Come—I spoke in jest,' he continued, with a fixed and passionless expression. 'There is no idea of any such thing. Rather

BELINDA

are we concerned to further interests which no one has more at heart than Sir Robert himself, and his cousin Miss Hackman. They will be grateful, believe me. I know all.'

'You bewilder me . . .' said Miss Curll, with hesitation. 'For whom do you speak?'

'For those who most desire Miss Montgomery's welfare. You *cannot*,' he added earnestly, 'act more for this poor young heiress's good, than by preventing a fatal course which all deplore. No one, in the end, will thank you more sincerely than her parent.'

'I know,' faltered Miss Curll, 'that you are in the secrets of the gentry in our neighbourhood as I am not . . . and . . . that you may well be speaking—I am sure you are speaking—with superior knowledge of the family and its affairs.'

'I am,' answered Lawyer Fox decidedly. 'Indeed, the matter is felt to be so urgent, that, on finding the mission fulfilled, a fur-

BELINDA

ther seventy-five pounds will immediately be placed at your disposal, through my agency.'


Miss Curll was silent. The lawyer rose, leaving the twenty-five pound note upon the table. Miss Curll rose also, but added not a word.

'Madam,' said the tempter, as he moved to the door, 'I leave it to your honour and to your solid sense—matured, if I may say so, by some experience of life—to discern and to effect the *true* interests of the young, wealthy, but infatuated female entrusted to your charge.'

With these words he was gone.



VI

 IR ROBERT, as he left for town, was delighted to observe the warmth with which his daughter received her companion, whom, indeed, she had not infrequently met in Bath when accompanying her cousin, Miss Hackman, upon errands of mercy. Her welcome argued success for his plans, and when, after warm embraces and benedictions, he fondly took his leave, he felt secure of her comfort until his return.

And, indeed, Miss Curll was assiduous in her attentions to her charge, immediately took over all household duties and surprised the

BELINDA

domestics by her lack of hesitation in the ordering of the household. Belinda accepted her solicitous advice on health and hours, and felt—after so many emotions—a sort of luxury in transferring the reins and relaxing into a complete vacuity from domestic cares.

But the more free was her mind from daily rounds, the more did the chief object of her thoughts return to her in a mixture of longing and delight. Soon (she mused) her ordeal would be at an end. Her dear papa would applaud her constancy—and meanwhile . . .

That same afternoon, a little before dinner, at about four o'clock, Miss Curll (who was standing at the window while Belinda read a book, reclining at ease upon a canopy) observed a figure, not of the household, approaching at some distance down the fields from the direction of Halston.

She turned without haste to her charge.

'My dearest,' she said (she was already on

BELINDA

such terms), 'You will excuse me, will you not? I shall take the air. I need it, and there is but a moment before we must dress for dinner, which I have postponed to the hour of five.'

She kissed the charming face, and, descending, strolled out towards the iron gates of the garden and on to the path through the park, as though careless of her steps.

The youth, whom she met half-way across the park field on the way to the wood saluted her awkwardly and would have passed. She stopped him with a smile, and asked him whither he was bound.

He told her that he bore a note from his master, Mr. Horatio Maltravers, for Miss Montgomery, and that he had not been desired to await a reply.

'It is well,' answered Miss Curll graciously. 'I am glad to have met you; for Miss Montgomery is at this moment reposing, and I can convey this letter to her in due time, when

BELINDA

she shall descend from her boudoir.' With that, in a genteel gesture which marked her early training, she withdrew the folded paper from the youth's hand, and smiling again with courteous confidence, placed it in her bosom. The lad, well pleased to be relieved of further duty, touched his forehead in rustic fashion and turned back the way he had come. Miss Curll slowly retraced her steps towards the mansion, humming in a somewhat worn but subdued voice one of those airs which Mr. Moore, the Irishman, had rendered familiar to the nobility and gentry, and which is now widely known as 'The Minstrel Boy'.

She regained her room. She opened a small casket of cedar wood, wherein her poor trinkets were kept. She was on the point of depositing therein the letter, unopened, when she paused, possessed by a desire which she was ashamed to admit even to her inmost soul, but weak enough to gratify.

BELINDA

It has been remarked by acute observers of the human species that the female is more prone to the vice of curiosity than the male. This impoverished gentlewoman was no exception to her sex. Her loneliness, her distant acquaintance with the wealthy, her soured memories of happier days, perhaps some faded phantasm of romance, conspired to tempt her.

If, as the Papists monstrosly pretend, an angel were deputed guardian for each of us, to defend us from evils which our own resolute wills should suffice to contest, such an imaginary being would have wept to observe the struggle in the soul of Miss Curll and its lamentable catastrophe.

She gently forced open the sealed and folded sheet with every imaginable precaution; none the less was it slightly torn. At this accident she shrugged her shoulders imperceptibly under her Castilian shawl; she knew that it prevented any retreat or later

BELINDA

subterfuge. She boldly opened the paper and was amused, interested, absorbed, to read these lines, penned in the bold and hasty hand of an impassioned lover:

‘It is a word from your most honoured father which permits me to dare—to adventure—these words. I know not, in my perturbation, how to begin. I fear lest—once entered upon such a path—I cannot bring myself to end. The same indulgence which has granted me the supreme felicity of addressing you has informed me that we may not meet—for an eternity of days: at the earliest upon Sir Robert’s return from the Metropolis. My agony is enhanced by his communication of its cause. What! You are suffering, and I may not be near you? You languish, and I may not fly to your side? I went this morning to the ferns, to the pines, to the streamlet—although I knew I should not find you

BELINDA

there. Believe me, the woods were fragrant with your presence, and all the sunlit world was filled with you. I say no more: I dare not. But oh! if the sacred moment which has transformed my life be not a cheat and an illusion, grant me one written word to support me in my fixed attention for the blessed, the distant moment in which I shall hear your living voice again, and, with its first accent, enter Paradise. I dare not write more: with what a thirst I long for but the briefest phrase from the quill your hand has held you may not know. It will be the sole sustenance of Horatio: it is life to him who now, and for ever more, must offer his soul to your keeping.'

The letter was refolded: hidden in its receptacle, and locked away. Some trace of a cold tear rose to the eye of the unhappy woman who had thus betrayed her trust. She

BELINDA

soon mastered that passing sentiment. She rose and moved towards Belinda's room.

Her charge was asleep as she noiselessly entered the apartment. She sat herself down at the window and, taking her wool and knitting-needles from the table where she had left them, occupied herself in the silent task until a delicate harmonious sigh revealed the awakening of her young companion.

'Miss Curll,' said Belinda, in a drowsy voice, 'is that you?' Then, fully awake, she added, 'I trust you enjoyed your stroll?'

'It was delightful, my dear,' replied the spinster with a pleasing glance. 'Silent communion with Nature is my chief joy; and I was pleased to discover that at such an hour I had the park to myself. No one stirred. I returned as I came, alone. The very leaves were at rest.'

Once more (but this time more deeply, and fully conscious) Belinda sighed. She rose

BELINDA

from her couch, in spite of Miss Curll's remonstrance, and moved towards the window: there she stood pensive, watching the golden light in the west, her eyes unconsciously turning to the distant trees that hid the aged walls and crumbling turrets of the Maltravers'.

Though but this one first day of separation was passing, she had hoped—she had dared to hope—that some sign would have come already from that house in all these long hours. She turned away and was silent.

'You are fatigued, my love,' said Miss Curll, implanting a kiss upon the pale brow. 'You shall dine in your room and then early seek repose.'

'I will do so,' said Belinda, resignedly. 'To-morrow I shall be completely recovered, believe me. To-night I must rest.'

* * * *

With the next day an undimmed sun dis-

BELINDA

played the ancient groves and illumined the venerable precincts of Marlden Towers. Belinda, rising late, found herself, for the first time, unresponsive to the glorious sky. Her hours were passed in an increasing ill-ease to which she could give no name, while her desire to conceal it from her companion rendered it the more burdensome. It was not hers to let her thoughts dwell . . . yet dwell they would . . . on why . . . on whether . . .

She told herself that two days were not a long delay upon such an occasion. That a letter or message from Horatio would come, must be patiently awaited. Next a hasty, passionate thought interrupted her melancholy—no sooner entertained than banished. With the fall of evening her feverish mind suggested to her the folly that her father might have overstated his indulgence in the account he had given her of his note to Horatio: that some harsh word of Sir Robert's

might have abashed the younger man and rendered him silent: nay, that Sir Robert might even have hinted against any correspondence, though he had himself assured her they were free to write.

She crushed the thought. It was followed by a miserable, unworthy dread lest even so short a separation should have changed Horatio's mind. This dread in turn yielded to what might in one less gifted, have verged on peevishness. At one moment it was with difficulty that she restrained her tears: at another her anger.

Darkness fell upon her unstable and feverish mood. A second night was passed in broken slumber.

The third day she was resolved to discover the cause—absence, neglect, illness . . . or chivalry?—the cause of that silence which had made her so to mourn.

She seated herself at her desk about mid-day, and, after making many a halt, many

BELINDA

an inner consultation, she made bold to write as follows:

'I take my pen—with what hesitation you best will know; with what eagerness (Yes, let me write it!) you best will understand. Yet it is only to ask you, Horatio, for such news of yourself as you have so often given me during the many years of our neighbourhood—of our acquaintance. My father has written to you—he has told me so. He has informed you of my indisposition, which forbids me to walk abroad or to receive. It will soon be gone—indeed, with his return a fortnight hence I shall be free as ever. But, in the interval, he would not (he assured me) have me neglect to hear from you. I have feared a little lest some passing illness may have postponed your writing: if that be so, then send me word, that I may write again

BELINDA

. . . but now . . . but now . . . I can write no more. You know what spirit moves my pen, as it signs my name for you,

‘Belinda.’

When she had read and re-read this simple letter—now dreading her daring, then emboldened by that inward flame—she took the step; she sealed it with her own ring; she summoned her maid.

Then, at a second thought, she determined to avoid anything that might by any misinterpretation seem clandestine, and boldly taking it to Miss Curll—for it was she who administered the household—begged her to see that a groom should at once bear the missive to Horatio.

‘I will see to it without delay, my dear,’ that lady assured her. ‘But you must not leave your room without precautions—and so early! Remember,’ she added archly, ‘that

BELINDA

I am your jailor and that your health is my great concern! Come, let me lead you back. I will return in a moment, and we will take our refection together in your apartments.'

Poor Belinda rewarded her with a sweet smile, and, after so trying an hour, lay down to rest, assured that a reply to her billet could not be long delayed.

Alas! My reader knows too well what the next action of the elderly companion could not fail to be! She hastened to her own room, locked the door, and with now eager, unhesitating fingers broke the seal, and perused those words which were meant for another, and for that other alone. This done, she put the letter hastily away in the casket, locked it, and returned to her ward. So true is it that one evil deed leads to another, and that what first our conscience will hardly permit we soon repeat with shameless ease!

* * * *

BELINDA

Meanwhile, in the cobwebbed and decaying woodwork of his ancient hall, Horatio Maltravers feverishly paced, marvelling, as the hours dragged on and day succeeded day, how it was that no word had reached him from The Towers. Now he was in an agony of doubt lest that dear frame should be tortured by fever, now in wonder whether a letter might not have miscarried; at last, when full inquiry had assured him that the illness of his adored was slight and mending, that no letter had come to him from the neighbouring house, he nerved himself to write once more. His excuse was ample: five days had passed since his first message: five days without a word.

He wrote with a soul disturbed; he wrote unevenly, hesitating for expression, destroying *brouillon* after *brouillon* until at last he had composed these lines—these feverish lines:

BELINDA

'Belinda, if I have offended you in aught, reveal it to me and I will make amends for life! If some ill rumour has reached you, which stains my honour in your eyes, briefly detail it to me and I will clear myself. If for any reason whatsoever you are prevented from sending notice of yourself, from letting me receive and worship the traces of your hand—oh! let me know it, and set at rest this tortured heart! But if you must still be obstinately silent, then believe, be sure, that I conclude my heaven to have been a brief illusion—your love (oh! my beloved) never to have answered mine. Yet, even so, respond! respond! I cannot be, I do not live, till I know even the worst: but oh! at least reply!'

This message, sealed and (how tenderly!) directed, he entrusted to the same messenger, then, relieved in some measure by such a paroxysm of the soul, he retired to rest in his an-

BELINDA

cestral chamber. In dreams he saw his appeal touched by divine hands, and compassion entering those pure eyes which had in them also the hidden fires of Heaven. It was but a dream; that letter, like its fellows, was intercepted; one more missive lay buried in the new crime-laden casket of Miss Curll.

Beyond those neighbouring elms, amid the well-appointed recesses of Marlden Towers, in her own luxurious apartments Belinda blushed and wept, self-tortured, as the days drew on.

Was it for this she had broken every rule of her condition and sex, outraged the tradition of the Montgomerys, and lowered herself to *originate* a correspondence with a *gentleman*? Was she thus to be disdained, nay, ridiculed? Then (with the next morn and after a troubled sleep) other counsels returned. It was an error; an accident! He was absent! Ill, perhaps! And as this idea

BELINDA

rose in her mind, her being stretched forth through airy space to seek, to console him.

Or again . . . Or? . . . Or what dread explanation of his silence?

It was no longer to be borne! She took once more in hand that long goose quill of rosy tint, her soul's good instrument, and, in the very moments when Horatio Maltravers was penning her his piercing cry, Belinda Montgomery was inditing, through blinding tears, this touching, this memorable appeal:

'Horatio, My Horatio,—I have abandoned all for you. I put my very soul into these words. . . . Ah! Why have you given me no sign? Why do I write? I know not what I write or how I write it. If you will not heed me, if you remain thus obstinately turned away—why then I write no more nor, indeed, exist. Forget, forgive the unfortunate Belinda.'

BELINDA

Such were the effects of passion and disappointment upon the unhappy maid. Alas! That words so distraught (yet so profoundly moving!) should have been lost in their turn. Within an hour they were locked away in the keeping of that treasonable companion.

In Halston's venerable halls Horatio Maltravers woke from a fevered sleep to one more unhappy, uncompanied day. The moments dragged like weeks; the morning half a year. He could not endure the silence: he walked to the very edges of his domain, still expecting against expectation some messenger at last. He returned morose to his table. After a meal untasted, wine barely sipped, he sat back silent in his chair and alone, considering a great resolution. At last he rose, approached his desk, took pen, ink, paper, sand, taper, wax, and seal, and composed this terrible adieu:

BELINDA

'Belinda—I call you by your name: it is as though I spoke to you, soul of my soul; for even to write your name is a benediction. Belinda, you remain deaf to my entreaty, dumb to my poor request for one whispered word. You have thought better of a foolish moment, and, indeed, what right had I to envisage the escalade of heaven?

'Forgive, forget, the unfortunate Horatio.'

He sealed the folded sheet and, summoning a menial, bade it be at once delivered at Marlden Towers. 'Saddle me Crusader!' he cried (naming the stoutest in his poor stable). 'Bring me saddle-bags: I will fill them myself. I ride to-night.'

The domestics of the shrunken household discussed in awed and lowered voices their master's strange demeanour. As for him, he put up but a small change of linen with a


BELINDA

rouleau of one hundred guineas (his sole reserve), left with his housekeeper a short word announcing an absence of indefinite duration, and in this feverish fashion, rode out into the night.

For such is youth! Irresponsible to itself and others, a cause of ceaseless concern to age; but stirred with primæval fires.



VII

PON the morrow of his departure, in the balmy morning following repose in a wayside inn, Horatio halted his mount a moment on the summit of a grassy down, whence could be surveyed the counties of Wiltshire and Somerset spread out to the westward far below. He turned in the saddle to scan from so far off among the hazy hills the scenes of his childhood. How familiar were those distant woods, those farewell heights of home—and yet how changed! The newly-risen sun illumined the prospect with a tender veil of cool and level light: it illumined that pros-

BELINDA

pect in vain! For one seraphic hour, those slopes and vales, those forests and those meads, had shone transfigured with the hallowed name of Belinda. Their glory had now departed, and they were nothingness. The flame in the lanthorn was extinguished; the fields, the trees, were empty strangers all.

With drooping head and slackened rein Horatio resumed his eastward way across the high greensward.

So day after day he proceeded by the chalk pastures, with the plains of England below him upon either side, his straining progress only checked by regard for the dumb friend that bore him on. With each succeeding stage along the lonely uplands, the fever of his mind increased. The few shepherds whom he passed in his career shrank back affrighted (with their flocks) from those eyes, too bright, that heated brow; such was his demented aspect that the very gipsies by the rare woodsidess shuddered at the specta-



HORATIO HALTED
HIS HORSE

BELINDA

cle, and muttered charms against ill-omen as the dark horseman swept past their miserable encampments.

So for two weeks and more he ceaselessly pursued his purpose, by Hampshire holdings and Sussex hamlets hidden in their combes, by causeways over the unpeopled marshes of Romney, by the Kentish gardens, until, from the heights of Shakespeare's cliff, he beheld beneath him upon a stormy morning, the crowded haven and sounding strand of Dover.

From far out to sea the billows chased one another to the shore in foaming tumult; the skies above raced in low scudding clouds. Horatio recked nothing of it all. What to him were the commotions of Nature, in whose heart a wilder tempest raged? Rather did the universal mood of conflict seem attuned to his own, and the fury of the heavens but an echo of his tumultuous soul.

Sitting erect upon his horse at the quay-

BELINDA

side, he accosted a humble mariner upon the decks of the packet for Boulogne (from the serrated coronet of whose chimney coal smoke already rose), and asked at what hour she would sail.

'Sir,' replied the sailor respectfully, as he noted the haughty demeanour of the young cavalier, to whom grief had lent an added dignity, 'if, indeed, the gale, in its increasing violence, permit us to attempt the passage, we should heave anchor in some two hours, for 'tis then the tide will serve. Yet I doubt me,' he added, as he turned a practised eye upward to the forbidding skies, 'but 'twill go hard with us in mid-channel, for it is the turn o' the moon.'

' 'Tis well,' replied Horatio, with gloomy decision; and, flinging a gold piece to the grateful seaman, he turned his horse's head towards a neighbouring hostelry, the ornaments and proportions of which promised something superior to the common run of a

BELINDA

seaport town; and, indeed, Horatio remembered that Dover was a place of passage familiar with many of the nobility and gentry in their progress to and from the Continent, and that the Envoys of Foreign Powers not infrequently graced it with their presence.

The landlord, standing at the door to welcome a guest whose distinguished bearing he had justly appreciated at his approach, bowed low to receive him, and asked what service he might render.

‘Let my horse,’ answered the gentleman, dismounting, ‘be led to his stable, whither I will accompany the groom to see that all is in order: the saddle and its bags carefully lodged aside, the creature’s coat well rubbed down, a rug provided, and an ample feed of good oats—for a man’s first duty is to his mount. Next I will ask you for a simple meal with a bottle of your best, and that disposed, I will beg a word with you.’

His collation consumed in silence, Horatio

BELINDA

beckoned the innkeeper (dutifully attendant a few paces aside) and addressed him as follows:

‘I would be brief. You have seen me accompany to his stall my last friend.’ (His host would have protested. Horatio checked him with uplifted hand.) ‘I noted the care you have bestowed on your own chaise-horses, their glossy coats, the kindly nature of your groom. Take, take, I pray you, this steed of mine—the final object of my domestic affections—for I depart from England, and for ever! He is worthy of your acceptance: bred on my own land by a sire, Bayard, of Lord Garling’s own stud, out of my mare Rosamonda. Five summers have barely passed over his proud head, nor has he a vice, unless it be some tendency to prefer the left-over the right-hand turning. He is gentle of disposition, of great endurance, of an easy yet elastic gait withal, and broken to harness.’

BELINDA

At these words the astonished innkeeper could not but fall back in confusion:

'By what right, Sir, can I . . .' he stammered. 'An hour's acquaintance . . . !'

'You will give him the home I desire,' imperiously interrupted his stranger guest. 'With you he will be secure from the sloth, the folly, the cruelty of bad horse-masters. Reasonable exercise will preserve him in good health, yet shall his powers be never overstrained. I leave him in good hands. I ask no more. . . . For I must abandon him . . . I go abroad for long, for long indeed. If you will harbour my gallant, my faithful *Cru-sader*, it is upon me that the boon is conferred.'

He was silent.

'Sir,' replied the host, in deep tones of ill-concealed emotion. 'I shall keep him not as a gift, but as a trust, until I have the honour and pleasure of seeing your face again. But, since you are determined thus to depart, will

BELINDA

you not tell me where your baggage lies in the town, that I may send my lads to bring it hither?’

Horatio Maltravers fixed him with his mournful but determined eye.

‘I take no scrip,’ he answered darkly. ‘I propose to pursue my way in poverty, abandoned and alone: nor seek to turn me from my purpose.’

‘Stay! Stay at least,’ his anguished host implored, ‘till yon threatening storm be past and a milder zephyr play upon the face of ocean!’

But Horatio sprang to his feet: ‘Detain me not!’ he cried. ‘I cross this very hour the waters that begird our inviolate land. I seek a foreign clime where none shall know my name, therein to lie forgotten till Death shall resolve my sufferings in his august oblivion.’

With these words he strode from the kindly threshold of that English inn, and resolutely embarked upon the vessel which



Joe By

~ DETAIN ME NOT! ~

BELINDA

was to bear him for ever from his native shores.

Even within the shelter of the haven the packet, as warps were cast off, heaved somewhat to the roll entering from without, but as she passed the pierheads the vessel began to pitch and stagger in the most alarming manner. Within a few moments the winds embraced her in full violence, and for the first half-hour the alarms of the few passengers rose to an extreme, while the experienced seamen themselves could ill conceal their anxieties in the unbridled charges of the elements.

The clanking of the mighty engines, the hoarse cries of command, the thunder of huge breakers against the timbers, nay, more than once, spray whirled across the decks, mingled with the shrieks of the blast through the rigging to add horror to the scene.

The waves rose mountains high as the shore receded into the murk, nor were occa-

BELINDA

sions lacking when one paddle-wheel would actually leave the water, its opposing *confrère* plunging deeply into the seething foam.

The captain (whose name was Beaver) affirmed, with rough sea-oaths, that in all his 317 crossings of the Channel he had never known so fearful a hurricane, and in the thickness of the flying scud the white sea-walls of England turned ghostly as though leagues away.

Throughout this wild commotion Horatio stood gloomy and unappalled. Grasping with his right hand a shroud to hold firm against the blast, his left he extended in an impassioned gesture towards the fading ramparts of his country, which have looked with scorn for so many centuries upon the puny efforts of her foes.

'Adieu!' he exclaimed. 'Adieu! Tall Cliffs of Albion! Though Fates implacable demand my exile and forbid me to see ye more, yet be assured that my soul remains

BELINDA

within your keeping. Fade! Fade! O Shores of My Country! Her son will retain his heritage in your name so long as Britannia grasps the Trident and the immortal shade of Nelson sleeps in glory beneath the cupola of St. Paul's!

The ordeal continued unabated. The embattled seas wrestled with English Oak and the Progress of Science for the mastery; but such is the power of Steam that in a short three hours, against tide and storm, the packet gallantly threaded the narrow passage of Boulogne Harbour.

Horatio landed. His knowledge of the French language stood him in good stead with the grotesque *Douaniers* and *Gens d'armes*, who questioned him in their surprise at his lack of luggage. He glanced with contempt at the paltry foreign coins which he received in exchange for his sturdy English gold, and with yet greater disdain upon the puny troopers who lounged in disgraceful

BELINDA

negligence before the doors of the *estaminet* where he ate an evening meal to the accompaniment of most indifferent wine.

'What!' thought Horatio at the sight. 'Can it be before such grimacing mannikins as these that the armies of Europe trembled? I have heard, indeed, that General Bonaparte was of insufficient stature, but I had yet to learn that he was followed by regiments of dwarfs!'

Delaying no more upon such unworthy beings, the young Englishman paid his score, manfully took the first main road apparent, and strode off southward through the summer evening. No matter to him which direction chance might assign, what halting-place he might attain. He desired no goal but to lose himself and his inhabiting despair in the voids of this vast world.

As darkness gathered, a signpost informed him that he was upon the *chaussée* for Montrool.

BELINDA

Horatio had covered but few miles; the last dusk of a summer night was fading into darkness, the tall trees along the *chaussée* side stood hardly distinguishable against the sky, when Horatio heard the approach of a carriage arriving by a cross-road. The place was lonely, and in the silence of the still, warm evening, the clatter of the horses' hoofs, the rumble of the wheels, resounded close at hand. He turned his head. The coach was now so close to its junction with the highway that he could distinguish the postillions on their mounts under the glare of the twin lamps, and that he was in the act of stepping back to let the equipage pass him, when, suddenly, harsh cries rent the solitary air and dark forms sprang from their hiding in the *fosse* beside the curb. One could be distinguished grasping the near leader's rein and throwing him back upon his haunches, another shook the handle of the door, from the hand of a third darted the blinding flash of

BELINDA

a firearm, whose formidable report reverberated over the deserted fields. Further ruffians were joining in the assault; the horrid oaths, the stamp of hoofs on the sparking stones, the shouts of the terrified postillions, all raised an uproar inexpressible, through which could clearly be heard the agonized appeals of a female in distress.

'O Ciel! Horreur! Au secours! Brigands!' such were the passionate appeals which rang above the din; and even in so confused a moment Horatio could distinguish that the high notes were those of a rich contralto voice, touched with an edge of age.

Our hero sprang at once into the fray. Though the assailants were half a dozen or more, he attacked them with invincible vigour. A second shot rang out, to the shrieks of the affrighted lady within the vehicle. The bullet grazing his arm did but rouse him to greater prowess. He laid about him with such right good will that the miserable for-

BELINDA

eigners fell sprawling upon every side. In less time than it takes to write these lines, the cowardly dogs had taken to their heels, and Horatio stood victor over the stricken field.

His first act was to recall the trembling postillions to their duty in their own language not unmixed with stern epithets of his own; his next to present himself with a low bow at the door of the carriage, and to salute the white, bejewelled hand extended to him through the window, while the musical, if vibrant, voice addressed him (to his astonishment) in the English tongue, spoken with native ease, though touched, however, faintly with French usage.

'My deliverer!' it murmured.

'Madam,' replied Horatio, modestly, 'I did but do my duty!'

'Ah! My heroic Fellow-Countryman . . . ' began the Marquise (for such was her title), as she gently laid that hand upon his arm. 'But, oh! Heaven!' she abruptly cried, 'you

BELINDA

are wounded!' Indeed, she had discovered in this gesture the blood that trickled to his wrist. 'Georges!' she continued loudly in the French language to her domestic, 'Unloose a lantern at once! Show dispatch! Bring it, and turn it hither!'

With that the door opened, and under the light now streaming upon it, the young gentleman beheld a tall figure, regal in deportment and of a full commanding presence, in no way diminished by the burden of over fifty years. Her features, of a Bourbon haughtiness, and with the full lips of this kind, were not the less handsome for their benignity and were instinct with the habit of command. They were crowned with a noble diadem of hair, now white, but as abundant as in youth, and a heavy pendant of diamonds, the natural ornament of her rank, which hung from her neck, enhanced with its magnificence a nobility which alone could support such gems.

BELINDA

As the servant hastened to lower the steps, and she more leisurely to descend, Horatio discovered turned upon him such fine brown eyes of a deep and tender humour as had, in days long past, profoundly moved the last courts of the ill-fated Louis, and had later disturbed in their brief interludes from battle the warriors of Austerlitz. At this moment they were filled with a tender solicitude, an anxious admiration, which brought a blush to the ingenuous cheeks of Valour. Putting eagerly forth a priceless handkerchief of old Alençon, she bound it, despite his protests, over the wounded arm, and next insisted that he must enter at her side, that she might drive him to his destination: for she would not hear of his continuing his way afoot in such a condition.

'Destination,' he answered low, after a long pause. 'I have none. I am a wanderer, self-exiled from the home of my childhood. I seek but the next hostelry, thence to con-

BELINDA

tinue through the world my trackless and lonely way.'

'Nay,' said she decidedly, in that clear voice to which its mere hint of a French habit added a subtle charm, 'then our course is plain. You must accompany me to my Château, which is near at hand, and there remain till you are healed of your wound. I will take no denial. That you are a gentleman your idiom, your gait, your accoutrement assure me. That you are the bravest of the brave' (she concluded, with an assuring glance) 'you have yourself proved.'

She commanded, he yielded and was grateful; for he already felt some weakness from his adventure and its consequence. For no long space they drove through the night till they turned off the *chaussée* to follow a long avenue of ancient trees, at the distant end of which could be discerned the lights of a great mansion. They entered by a mighty courtyard, flanked with pilasters of an earlier

BELINDA

age, they passed together into high rooms wherein hung tapestries from the border towns and Flanders, representing the rape of Persephone, the triumph of Constantine the Great, and the misfortunes of Actæon.

To the guest every attention was shown. In a bedroom filled with the carved oak of a fashion now a century past, his wound was skilfully dressed by an aged serving-woman, Fanchette by name, with simples that cooled and allayed the fever of the blood. He found fine linen provided for him, buckled shoes for his feet, and all the appurtenances of a luxurious toilet, so that, upon descending to the hall, it seemed to the Wanderer as though he had found a home.

Supper was immediately ordered, and at the meal his hostess, while avoiding with careful tact too close an inquiry so early in their acquaintance, asked after his journey, his fortune at sea in the gale, and more than once demanded an assurance that his ban-

BELINDA

daged arm was eased by the cares which had been devoted to it. She made plans for his re-equipment, careful not to smile at the fantasy of youth, which can thus start out into the world unfurnished; for life had taught her with what generous moods such follies are entwined.

Of herself she spoke more freely, holding that he should be at ease for whatever stay his recovery might require. She told him her name—*de lay Ferronnière*; her state, the widow of the late Marquis, whom she had wed in the very year of the Bastille; her English birth. As she spoke, she dwelt, when his eyes were averted, upon his dark curling hair, his strong but easy frame, and thought within herself how such a one might have sat there as her son to companion her age, had Heaven willed it and had the great war spared him.

The hour was late; the fatigues of his day had been extraordinary; she would not weary him further with converse, but bade him

BELINDA

sleep well, and left him in a deepening mood of security and repose.

* * * *

At his tardy waking upon the morrow, Horatio's first feelings were of wonder. In what apartment did he lie? What bed, what curtains were these? Who had transported him to a foreign land? With full consciousness the memories of yesterday returned to him, but with these a throbbing in his arm recalled to him his wound, the pain of which he had lost in the oblivion of sleep. It increased, and with it a certain faintness, which he attempted to master—but in vain.

Alarmed, he would have cried for aid; but his voice failed him. Happily, at this moment, there came a knock at the door and Fanchette, appearing with chocolate, was in the act of drawing the curtains of his couch, and bidding him the '*bon réveil*', when she started so strongly at his changed appearance

BELINDA

as almost to drop the tray she bore. In a broken whisper he informed her of his condition. She flew to her mistress, who had eagerly awaited news, and in a moment the Marquise was at his side. Her noble features indicated the poignant anxiety of a new friend, her eyes the profound affection of a mother, and her whole bearing the gratitude of the Female rescued by Chivalric Daring from the direst peril. She did not disdain to kneel at the bedside; she smoothed his pillow; she bent over him to catch such tenuous words as he could utter in his failing powers: they were those of thankfulness for her hospitality and of regret that he could not rise, but must, for the time, be a burden upon her goodness.

‘Ah me!’ exclaimed the Chatelaine, rising to her feet. ‘Would that we could summon the services of some famous medical man to attend your necessity! We have but a worthy country surgeon at our call; but at least he

BELINDA

is of an age to have learned his trade in the older and better days, and his judgment will be sound.'

The doctor arrived. His conclusions were favourable. The bullet had but abraded the emphobely and caused superficial lesion of the lesser capillary ducts, without organic disturbance of the lymphatics, or serious reduction of the camboloid process; while the thapsus major had not been touched, and its integuments were wholly immune.

Profound was the relief of the Marquise on hearing these words, and even Horatio's courage permitted him a wan smile of satisfaction. For, though life was now nothing to him, yet he was loth to be an encumbrance, and still, in his weakness, expected the moment when he should take the road with strength renewed and bury his broken spirit in the wild.

His convalescence was tardy. Days passed. The wound mended; but a numbness and

BELINDA

rigor of the limb succeeded, and, to restore its pristine suppleness, continued treatment was demanded.

Rarely during this period of relaxation and gradually returning health was the Marquise absent from Horatio's side. She watched over him with a tender solicitude which his earlier years had never known. From the rich store of her experience she unrolled for him the tales of the great years, and his imagination was enriched by recitals of royal pomp, of imperial blazonry, of triumphant armies returning from all the battlefields of Europe; of the Restoration, and the splendid Court in the Tuileries. A woman of the world, a great lady, renewed and enlarged him with that art which a knowledge of Society inspires, which a life well lived deprives of evil.

When first her guest was permitted to take the air, she accepted his arm in slow paces through the alleys of her park; and now could

BELINDA

Horatio admire the elevation of the Château, its moat, the classic statuary upon the bridge thereof, its remaining turret of the Dark Ages, its later Mansard roof, and all the majestic architecture of the XIVth Louis, mellowed by more than a hundred years. Now could he mark its consonance with the solemn towering trees which ringed about the wide lawn before him, as though with the mystery of some primeval forest. Here, also, in the midst of the sward, a graceful fountain high tossed its crystal fronds in the air, which, falling with ceaseless undulatory splash upon the trembling pool below, attuned the mind to repose. The bronze dolphins upon its marble round, streaked with water weeds, recalled both antiquity and endurance. Over the young man there spread the sense of home.

Yet was his heart not healed. Profound, a living flame in the depths of his being, the

BELINDA

anguish of irreparable loss consumed him.
For, as the poet has written:

' This sleep I swear shall last the length of
day;
Not noise, not chance, shall drive this dream
away;
Not time, not memory, not good fortune, no,
Not all the weight of all the tears of the
world.'

One day his sheltering conductress led him upwards by a winding stair to the battlements of the turret, whence all the prospect of the Picard woods and their champaign lay stretched before him, and beyond them the broad belt of sea.

The air was strangely clear from recent showers. Far off upon the northern horizon could be discerned, how faintly blue, some traces of land. They were the hills of England. He gazed on them enrapt, and his eyes

BELINDA

filled with tears. She watched him fixedly as he thus stood transfixed in memory, and all unconscious of her regard. 'Would you return?' she murmured. He awoke at her voice. 'Never!' he firmly answered. 'I will not commit the sacrilege of a question,' came her warm tones; 'let time be good to you, nor vex yourself with my concern—deep though it be—for your felicity: for an alleviation of your secret sorrow.'

Horatio paused a full moment ere he could bring himself to reply.

'Madam,' he said, at last, in tones of low solemnity, which yet were thrilled with passion, 'your goodness commands my obedience; my gratitude urges a reply . . . But, spare, oh, spare this heart! A goddess—nay, a woman, and a woman faithless . . .' With that his utterance choked, and he was silent.

'I understand,' the musical voice replied with infinite tenderness, and even as its tones fell in balm upon his heart he felt the light

BELINDA

touch of her hand upon his shoulder. 'Say no more, but rather accept my profound, my comprehending . . .' She would not continue.

'And yet,' he murmured to himself (inaudibly, as he believed; steeped once more in his own memories), 'what motive intervened? My poverty?' (he clenched his hands). 'Yet was the House of Halston not unworthy of alliance with an heiress of the Montgomerys!'

But at that word his companion moved most suddenly. She gasped with a slight, an almost imperceptible but an abrupt and stricken sound. She laid a hand upon her heart. Horatio looked up sharply in alarm. 'It is naught,' she said, with a catch in her breath, '. . . it is naught. I am recovered. Come, let us return.' And she led him down to the halls below.

But as she went the Inexorable had swept the chord of life within her. She was far off

BELINDA

and very young. Her earliest springtime had returned: her eighteenth year. It was in the old days ere ever Revolution had marred the dignity of the world. She was in her mother's garden, in her English home, and the clear Thames slid by. The stately union designed for her had been announced, the highborn foreigner who stood so conspicuous in the service of the French king had honoured her parents with a demand for her hand, and they had welcomed so great an alliance. By her side a young soldier of her own people stood silently imploring, and she had begun to know too late that his face would remain with her for ever.



VIII



MR ROBERT, during his legal transactions in the metropolis, had been increasingly disturbed, as had his cousin Miss Hackman, by the occasional letters from home. He was impatient to return. For Miss Curll, who was assiduous in the duty of correspondence as in every other, could not conceal from him the tardiness of Belinda's return to health. Indeed, from certain guarded phrases, he had gathered that his child, far from advancing, was sinking farther into the distemper which had so gravely alarmed him.

On his return his worst fears were con-

BELINDA

firmed. He found the beloved daughter so far extenuated with a mysterious decline that it would seem as though some malign consumption had marked her for its prey. Kneeling in anguish beside the sofa upon which the fair but now frail form so pathetically lay, he held her hands with such gentleness as his own rough grasp could assume, blamed himself for his absence, necessary though it had been, implored her to tell him in what way he might alleviate her distress, and suggested with all the incapacity of his sex a hundred distractions, to which for all her dutifulness she could reply with nothing but a sweet despairing smile. In vain did Miss Curll assure him that the indisposition had made no fatal progress. In vain did Miss Hackman, secure in over forty years of robust health, protest that such fantasies were negligible, and even declaim against the vagaries of modern youth. The father's heart too truly informed him that a deep-seated cause was at

BELINDA

work, which must be exorcised if tragedy were not to follow.

It was not till the third day that, in a passionate fit of weeping, which alarmed but confirmed his judgment, she confided to him in one sobbing word, if confidence it could be called, the true source of her defection. She had pronounced the word 'Horatio', and had added, in a breath that he could hardly hear, 'My Horatio!'.

Then he learnt all: how no word had come from Halston, how—with what hesitation, with what anguish did she confess it—she herself had written, and had been met with silence.

Dark was the Baronet's brow when he returned from his daughter's presence, and could unbend in the privacy of his study. Anger succeeded to disdain, fury to anger, as he turned in his mind the indignity offered to the name of Montgomery, the nameless conduct of one to whom he had shown a per-

BELINDA

haps culpable indulgence. At last his resolution was taken. Putting his hat upon his head, grasping the ashen plant which he invariably carried, and summoning the faithful hound who was his inseparable companion, he strode forth in a fever upon the path to the house of the Maltravers'. But as he came through the belt of trees and approached the venerable if melancholy pile, not a few indications perplexed him. The flag was absent from its customary staff. He could see that in the main windows blinds were drawn. There was no recent trace of wheels upon the approach; and when he thundered upon the great door (for in his wrath, now mixed with bewilderment, he had so far forgotten his breeding as to use this form of summons) none answered. In vain did he strike again; hollow echoes only answered him from within.

His anger rising still higher, Sir Robert strode to the offices at the back, and finding

BELINDA

there in the courtyard a dull, gaping youth, with no other domestic about, he stormed at him to inquire why his summons had been neglected, and asked what days were these in which gentlemen could be so treated! He even went so far as to seize the trembling youth by both shoulders, and to demand with vigorous *bousculade* where his master was, bidding him find the young gentleman that instant or it would be the worse for him.

'My master?' stammered the unhappy youth, between his rattling teeth. 'Mr. Horatio? He has gone, Sir, gone this great while.'

'And whither, lad?' shouted the infuriated Squire.

'Oh, sir, we know not,' replied the menial. 'He left no word, but rode away on that very evening, after I had taken his last letter to your house.'

'A letter to my house? A letter from Mr. Maltravers to my house?'

BELINDA

'Yes, sir. I had already taken such. This was the last.'

'And to whom, pray, were they addressed? I have received none. I found none awaiting me on my return.'

'Nay, sir,' confessed the unfortunate lad, too terrified for concealment, 'the writing outside was to her young ladyship your daughter, to Miss Montgomery herself.'

'What say you?' cried Sir Robert. 'To Miss Montgomery! Have you the face to tell me that you delivered these missives into my daughter's hand?'

'Nay, sir,' gasped the distracted fellow. 'I gave them to that lady whom I met in the park'; and by his description the Baronet was thunderstruck to recognize the portrait of the woman Curll, and stood for a moment dumb.

'It is well,' he at last enounced in measured tones, the lowered *timbre* of which very greatly relieved his victim's terrors. 'I know enough.'

BELINDA

Inwardly repenting of so much violence, now that he had attained his ends, Sir Robert was fain to offer the youth a considerable largesse, which was gratefully accepted, and turning his steps homeward he marched with less speed than he had come, but full of purpose, along the path which led him back to his distracted home.

Ere he would take a further decision, he once more approached Belinda, with infinite care and delicacy. But her confession had relieved the poor child, and his heart filled at her renewed affection and freedom of discovery. He learnt, indeed, once more her ignorance of Horatio's appealing letters: he did not as yet inform her of them; but he also learnt for the first time how, with her high and candid honour, she had herself entrusted to Miss Curll the poor lines which she blushed to admit having written to Halston.

Her father, in leaving her, imprinted a long kiss upon her pale brow, assuring her,

BELINDA

with as hearty a smile as he could call up, that all would be well—little as his judgment agreed; and, first seeking Miss Hackman and telling her the results of his inquiries, he proceeded with that lady to the interrogation of the culprit upon whom all the vials of his indignation were ready to be poured.

The Baronet and his cousin, not omitting a well-bred tap upon the door of her boudoir and her permission to enter, advanced abreast into Miss Curll's retreat, or rather, into that small but exquisitely furnished apartment which her Patron's goodness had put at her disposal. Sir Robert coughed: Miss Hackman cleared her throat, so much as gentility permitted. With this introduction the head of the household engaged the difficult task.

'Miss Curll,' he said, in a slow and steady voice, 'I have certain questions to ask of you.'

'Of *me*,' cried that lady, half rising.

'Of you,' solidly repeated her employer. 'I

BELINDA

will waste no time—neither my time nor yours—in any lengthy approach to the subject. Innocence is easily maintained. Guilt,’ and here Miss Curll could not refrain from a sudden movement, ‘betrays itself by the just dispositions of Heaven upon the nervous system of this our mortal frame.’ At the word frame the person thus addressed turned away her features, whether from modesty or inability to meet the eye of her judge. ‘They that lie under a false accusation or even under but the supposition thereof will easily manifest by their indignation and by the ingenuous heat of their denial how wrongly they are suspected. But they,’ he continued, in louder and deeper tones, ‘who find opposed to them the accusing finger of their own conscience are in a different case . . . Miss Curll, it has been suggested to me, nay, it has been affirmed, that you have intercepted correspondence between Mr. Maltravers and your tender charge my daughter: between

BELINDA

my daughter, your tender charge, and Mr. Maltravers . . . Speak! It is false or true?’

For a moment the wretched woman hesitated between avowal and a falsehood whereby she would have lost all consideration in this world, her immortal soul in that to come. Then, appreciating, with the rapid intuition of women, that denial would be of no service, that confession might mitigate to her the consequences of her crime, she clasped her hands, she bowed her head, and answered in clear, excruciating tones: ‘It is true! God help me! It is true!’ With a slight but rapid gesture she pushed towards him the casket containing the letters of the two lovers, the contents of which the Baronet perused for some interval before thrusting them into his coat.

For a few moments he dared not trust himself to speak. When he did, his words were terrible.

‘Monster!’ he cried, as though he would

BELINDA

blast in one bolt of vengeance the abominable treason of his dependant.

'Indeed, you are greatly to blame,' added Miss Hackman, in restrained tones, as she coldly eyed the shrinking form of her protégée.

'Woe is me!' sobbed the unfortunate gentlewoman, rocking upon her knees and wringing her hands in a frenzied mixture of penitence, alarm and shame. 'What a return have I made for so much goodness! What a recognition of such abundant charity. But oh! Sir!', to Sir Robert, 'Oh, Madam!', to Miss Hackman, ' 'twas my poverty, my desperation, drove me to this crime! The enormous sum of twenty-five pounds in a Bank of England note offered me by Lawyer Fox . . . '

'By Lawyer Fox?' interrupted the astonished Baronet.

' . . . urged on, as I believe, by Sir Henry Portly . . . '

BELINDA

'By Sir Henry Portly?' repeated Sir Robert, with flashing eyes and flaming brow.

' . . . this,' concluded the unfortunate gentlewoman, 'was the lure that drew me to my ruin!'

With that the wretched being buried her face in her hands and wept unrestrainedly. Sir Robert considered for a brief moment, and then delivered his sentence.

'You are not unaware,' said he, solemnly, checking with his hand a motion of his cousin's, 'that I am a Justice of the Peace, and might severely visit your unspeakable misdemeanour. It is in part consideration for your victim, in part some recognition of the birth which you have disgraced, which bids me hold my hand. Begone!' he pointed to the door. 'Leave on foot, by the highway, to your lodgings in Bath, a roof the hospitality of which you have so treasonably abused. Your effects shall follow before nightfall in my cabriolet.'

BELINDA

With bowed head and hands deplorably pendant at her side, the stricken sinner passed through those portals for ever.

* * * *

At her departure the Baronet fetched a deep sigh, and preventing the comments of his cousin by an inhibiting gesture, made at once for his desk in his private room, where, after no little communion with himself, he indited the following letters.

He penned to Lawyer Fox the first stern missive:

'Sir,

'I have heard from Miss Curll that you have tempted her with an extravagant bribe to intercept my daughter's letters. I will condemn no man unheard. But I desire an immediate explanation or disproof of such conduct; failing which, I shall take whatever action the situation demands.

BELINDA

'I am, Sir, your obedient Servant to command,

'Robert Montgomery (Bart.), J.P.'

To Sir Henry Portly he adopted a different strain, and worded his letter in phrases less peremptory, but equally decisive. He recollected that *this* correspondent was after a fashion his equal, and couched his demand as follows:

'Sir Henry,

'I am informed by the unhappy culprit herself that Mr. Fox, the Lawyer of Bath, has bribed my daughter's governess, Miss Curll, to intercept her letters. That she has done so there can be no doubt; she has confessed, the missing documents have been discovered and now lie before me. But she adds her belief that the crime was committed at your instigation. I will condemn no man unheard, but I desire an im-

BELINDA

mediate explanation or disproof of such conduct, failing which, I shall take whatever action the situation demands.

'I am, Sir Henry, your neighbour to command,

'Robert Montgomery.'

These letters, duly sealed with the crest of the Montgomerys, he dispatched, the one by his groom, John, on Beauty, the other by his huntsman, Charles, on Diamond, bidding the one post to the office of Lawyer Fox, the other to Molcombe Abbey.

He awaited the replies. Never was he to receive them!

* * * *

Lawyer Fox, ever cautious, upon hearing the clatter of galloping hoofs in the street without, and the sudden reining up of the steed by its rider, astutely divined the arrival of some important communication. Impor-

BELINDA

tant? That word, for the deep and secretive mind of such a man, spelt also 'Suspected'. None but himself must receive it. Contrary, therefore, to his usual custom, he passed swiftly through his clerk's room and was already at the door by the time Sir Robert's servant had knocked. He personally accepted the sealed and folded sheet.

Not till he was safe within his own office (the door of which he had silently bolted), not till he had glanced over each shoulder to make sure that no witness could observe the contents, did he break the seal. A moment's rapid perusal was enough. His naturally pallid cheeks took on a ghastlier shade of grey. For a moment his heart stopped beating. Then, through clenched teeth, he muttered: 'The villain! Portly has done this! Thinking to steal a march upon me, tempted by Montgomery's gold, he has betrayed our common cause! I must away to deal with this at once!'

BELINDA

He donned the large and low-brimmed hat, the dark, mysterious cape, which were proper to such an occasion, sent immediately to Mr. Groper's, the liveryman, for the first mount available, and, indifferent horseman though he was, he spurred at breakneck speed for Molcombe Abbey.

Within those princely halls Sir Henry Portly, their ruined owner, sat poring over Sir Robert's minatory lines, which had reached him (such was the distance between the two houses) a full half-hour after Lawyer Fox's departure from Bath.

Pursing his dark brow, his strong shoulders bent forward in the contemplation of his purpose, the prime mover in these catastrophies pondered his revenge or flight.

'Fox has done this!' he hissed, between half-parted lips. 'He would have the better of me at the last, as he has had the better of me year after year, until I lie with broken fortunes, as I now do. For what motive? For

BELINDA

the toadying of Montgomery, or—who knows?—in his pay! It now remains . . .’ but even as he rose at these words to determine between a fell purpose and ignominious flight, Lawyer Fox strode into the room, his arms folded beneath the ample sweep of the dark cape flung across his shoulder, his eyes glaring with a diabolical light upon the hated features of his prey.

‘So, Portly! I have found you!’ were the words he launched, with the cold venom of a calculated hate. Portly stood back a moment with crisped hands clawing in challenge. Then, with one bound, he sprang at his oppressor’s throat.

The contrast between the two men might well have caused an expert in the art of self-defence to determine victory for the gentleman as a foregone conclusion. But the solicitor, though slight in build, was of an iron sinew, and of a ferocity more than human. Even as Sir Henry’s powerful fingers grasped

BELINDA

Fox's throat, the lawyer's own two hands were met upon his enemy's.

Neither could cry out; each stifled, with half-heard guttural gasps, under the pressure of an implacable avenger—for each was impelled by a more than human power, and each was the dreadful instrument of Divine Vengeance. The couple swayed, thus locked, in horrid mutual effort, for a space of time which might have seemed to an onlooker eternal, which to the protagonists, as the choked brain grew dull lost measure. They swayed, I say, they staggered; at last they fell with a crash to the floor, the fingers of each still straining at the other's neck. Only a few convulsive movements still betrayed some lingering, instinctive dregs of life. These in their turn, twitched and grew still. There for hours, through the declining afternoon, through the advancing evening, the corpses lay clutched in their act of mutual doom.

The butler bringing in the candles sprang

BELINDA

back in horror at the sight which met his eyes. The household was summoned, and after a brief, whispered, terrified debate, it was determined to send for Sir Robert, who, in his capacity of Magistrate, should take cognizance of the fearful scene.

Standing with his bare head bowed, that good man paused a moment over the dead; then, calling for a paper, he took details of all that could be told him, sent word at once by the fleetest of the Molcombe stable to the Coroner, and for a full half-hour sat meditating upon that Final Justice with it behoves us all to dread, and which these unhappy men had defied.

'In what times do I live!' he murmured to himself, as he rode homewards from the appalling scene. Much was needed to shake so stout a heart, who in a long life of pursuing the fox and bringing down wild-fowl of every kind, had not known fear. But that evening his hand trembled as he lifted his

BELINDA

wine-glass at dinner, and recited to his cousin the dreadful business of the day.

Upstairs Belinda slept more easily and with a more contented brow than for many days she had known. It was but exhaustion after so fierce an ordeal. The Baronet and his cousin conferred at table upon their next duty.

'Robert,' said Miss Hackman, in tones more kindly but not less decisive than her wont, 'two things would I propose to you. First that for some little time these tragic happenings shall be withheld from our dearest charge—yes, even the faithfulness of her lover, and the interception of his and her effusions. Only this—his departure—should be communicated. Next, that as soon as may be—nay, before there is chance of her hearing—the very next day, even to-morrow if it may be, we shall take her away out of these scenes which have so affected her spirit, to distant renovating travel amid the quaint peo-

BELINDA

ples and the sublime scenery of the Continent of Europe. Believe me, a few weeks, two months, or three at the most, of such invigorating change, will restore to us our beloved Belinda in all the freshness of her youth. Then shall she have the strength to hear what has passed (which we may feign to have but recently heard). Then also, with the lapse of time, there shall be dimmed the image of this—this young man whom, presumably, we shall never see again.’

Heavily as it bore upon his paternal heart, Sir Robert could but accede to so wise an advice. His only fear was lest the daughter of the house were not fit to undertake a voyage. He was assured by his cousin, with the superior experience of her sex, that in easy stages the distance to Dover could be covered with impunity, especially as the novelty of air and scene would rapidly restore the strength of the invalid.

When, the next day, Sir Robert broke this

BELINDA

proposal to his child, with what pleasure did he not see her almost eager acceptance of the change. She even spoke with something of interest upon the towns they might visit, the adventures they might enjoy; and the high opinion already held of his cousin by her father rose to increased respect at the operation of her plan.

She it was who superintended all preparations, pressing the servants to renewed efforts, she who chose and arranged the means of transport, marked on the map the stages of their way to Dover, procured from the office of the Mail the hours of sailing, made a list of the hostelries at each halt, and even discovered the prices to be demanded.


She it was also who, with admirable forethought, had provided that the Reverend John Atkins should accompany the party as ghostly adviser and comforter—an arrangement vastly to the comfort and spiritual ease of their beloved charge.

BELINDA

A Locum Tenens—the Reverend Mr. Caley of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford—was provided for six months at a moderate expenditure; and though this young priest had imbibed perhaps too many of the new sacerdotal notions unfortunately prevalent in his University, it was remarked that the inconvenience of an over-elaborate ritual would not fall in the Squire's absence upon his household, but only upon the farmers and lower orders of the parish, whose place it is to accept such ministrations as their betters may see fit to provide.



IX

 N THE appointed morning a considerable column might have been seen rolling eastward down the road which led to the first stage at Warminster, whence it was proposed to advance without haste through Salisbury, Winchester, Petworth, and Hastings, to the Port of Dover. A chaise followed by humbler vehicles led the van of the procession in clouds of dust. It contained Sir Robert, his daughter, her confidential maid, and Miss Hackman, whose energy and foresight were responsible for all these arrangements. As they must proceed abroad by relays of horses

BELINDA

at the *maisons de poste*, this conveyance was conducted, so far as the harbour of departure, by postillions newly clad in the uniform of the Montgomerys, and presenting a most impressive sight to the awed stare of the populace in the towns through which they rode.

In a second vehicle followed Sir Robert's valet, Belinda's second maid, Miss Hackman's and the clergyman. In the third, which was of stouter build and moved with a prodigious clatter, a vast pile of luggage rose high and broad, (so large, indeed, as to suggest a cottage on wheels), the necessary equipment for those of Family proposing a long absence in foreign parts. The whole was covered by a sort of sea-cloth which made clear to all observers that it was the purpose of the travellers to traverse the Main.

Such was the outset of the journey for which Sir Robert—or rather, Miss Hackman—had laid out an itinerary which should include the sights of Paris, the waters of Au-

BELINDA

vergne, the Italian Lakes, and all that variety which an intelligent exploration of the Continent should afford. For Dover thus they made across the summer beauties of South England.

With each day's progress the health of the beloved daughter improved. The novel scenes, the numerous slight adventures of each changeful day, the air of the higher lands, and the very diversity of lodgings, distracting the mind from a contemplation of itself, were the causes of the grateful phenomenon. With bodily vigour mental resilience returned. The young lady would now smile with happier lips upon the parent whose every thought was wrapped up in her welfare, and, ere the week was ended, a droll incident at a fair which they visited in Midhurst provoked the charming girl to the first true laughter to be heard from her lips since the unforgettable day.

Sir Robert eagerly embraced the opportu-

BELINDA

nities thus offered for the entertainment of his offspring. He pointed out all objects of interest upon the road, the seats of the gentry, with their names, the spires of the churches, and such sites of historic moment as their path might approach. At Hastings they delayed a couple of days to explore the interesting ruins of the Castle, and to be conducted for a morning over the battlefield where the Norman William so fatally defeated the gallant but unfortunate Harold. At Rye they curiously noted the field where once rose the shipping of a crowded haven; at Romney the expanses over which, in the days of the great Elizabeth, the waters of the deep had rolled, but which Time and art have transformed to rich pastures maintaining their hundred flocks. At Dover itself Sir Robert ordered several days' repose, that the best weather might be chosen for crossing, the most convenient tide, and that the dear invalid might be fully rested after her journey. At last,

BELINDA

upon a sunlit morning, with the waters dancing in tiny wavelets, the wind but a balmy breeze which left the level of the seas unmoved, they embarked for the Gallic shore.

Strange, dark coincidence! Upon that watery track which Belinda now followed, Horatio had passed those few short days before! Her eyes beheld those very cliffs to which he had addressed his long farewells; and by some influence her heart was more profoundly—though confusedly and vaguely—troubled than it had yet been since the stimulus of travel had begun to relieve it. But with every beat of the engine her country, the scene of those despairing memories, receded farther into the haze. Cape Grinny could be discovered far off; it grew clearer; they approached the strand; at last, with a majestic glide, they passed into the harbour of Boulogne, and the eyes of Beauty were enlivened by the prospect of a new land.

Sir Robert conducted the ladies immedi-

BELINDA

ately in a hired cabriolet to the upper town, where, at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, its master (who had had ample warning by foreign post from Miss Hackman) obsequiously received his distinguished guests. The equipages were dealt with in a *hangar* upon the quay, to which the Baronet proposed to return when all was ready, and his cousin and daughter refreshed by a long rest, upon the morrow. The plan was laid to make the first stage to the Hôtel de France at Montrool, thence to the Tête de Bœuf at Abbeville, thence (in a longer day) to Amiens, where they might enjoy the quaint but striking form of the Cathedral; and so, in a week's unhasting advance, to the Metropolis.

That evening the father and daughter watched the fading light under the venerable avenue of the ramparts; their peace and silence promised a night of deep repose, and long before the hour which Fashion dictates to her votaries as the moment for retiring,

BELINDA

Belinda was sunk in a slumber which should have lasted to the freshness of the morning.

But evil intervened. In the dead of night, when (it is whispered) the flood of life is at the ebb and mortal powers are at their least to resist the unseen enemies of the mind, a dream disturbed her spirit. Its influence increased. A nameless air of dread and piercing dereliction filled the obscure, imaginary place wherein her awful fancy wandered. She trod a gloomy shore, where barely could be discerned the shapes of sea and land under grey shadowing mists, and where the waters broke noiselessly in long and sluggish lines upon the sand. There, there, too far, turned from her, a departing ghost, stood Horatio. In vain did she stretch forth her hands in piteous appeal. In vain would she have called, so that he could not but have turned to her. Her voice gave no sound: in that land of shades an impotent effort alone replaced it. His face she might not see; his

BELINDA

presence as it abandoned her was instinct with the sense of passing, and a mighty somewhat in the core of her being uttered in silence the dreadful sentence: Lost! Lost! Lost! The sword was through her heart.

She woke with violence, and stared at darkness, half-raised with one hand upon her pallet. There was no moon. The small casement made but a square of doubtful greyness upon the black night around. Not he, not he, but all Nature, all the scheme of things, was gone and utter isolation had arrived.

Then that beneficent power which will not abandon youth in its agonies, the keenness of which age never knows, let loose in her a flood of weeping. With her face buried in her arm upon the troubled pillow, she poured out unutterable griefs, her glorious hair a cloud about her, shaken in a storm of sobs. It lessened. Her very self was dissolved, the source of suffering exhausted, and

BELINDA

she passed for hours into a dead and dreamless sleep.

* * * *

It was not till after the midday meal of the morrow that the journey was resumed. Sir Robert employed the morning in seeing to the *douane* with the luggage, in bespeaking horses, drivers and postillions for the first stage to Montrool (a matter of four hours only), and making the necessary purchases in the town.

When he rejoined the ladies he noted, indeed, the wearied eyes of his daughter, and was concerned to mark some return of her fatigues; but he set all down to the strain of an unaccustomed voyage, and, calm as had been the sea, to the vibration of the steamship and the wearing formalities of landing. Miss Hackman confirmed him in this, and upon his asking Belinda with careful tenderness whether she would not benefit by another

BELINDA

day's delay, she eagerly assured him that she far preferred an immediate departure; and indeed she shuddered to recall the night, and longed for the relief of unfamiliar and varied days.

In early youth, before his twentieth year, the Baronet had made the Grand Tour in company with a tutor hired for him by a provident sire, a gentleman of long lineage fallen upon evil days, though formerly an officer in the French service. He was thus familiar not only with the language, but the customs of the country he now revisited, after so many years filled with civil turmoil and foreign war. Hearty as was his justified contempt for what the great Duke of Wellington well styles 'the beggarly nations of the Continent', he was not without a cultured interest in their antiquities, and even some approved features of their social life. Especially had he been impressed by the great country houses of the French nobility—now

BELINDA

sadly decimated!—and he readily admitted the refinement and *grandeur d' âme* of their occupants.

It was, therefore, with an appetite recalling earlier years that he looked forward to revisiting scenes familiar to him at a more impressionable age. He pointed out to the ladies from the windows of the chaise the height on which Bonaparte had gathered his army in a futile and insolent menace of invasion, which the mighty genius of Pitt, aided by the City of London, had deflected on to the unfortunate battalions of Austria. He recalled the fact that Boulogne was the last resting-place of Godfrey de Bouillon, the valiant leader of the Crusade, as also of numerous English gentlemen compelled to foreign residence through financial misfortune. In passing Port de Briques he pointed out the plain (then a lagoon) whereon had floated the galleys of Cæsar, and so improved every mo-

BELINDA

ment of their progress with instructive conversation and comment.

All thus went well with the party until, when they were already some miles from the town and in a district peculiarly deserted, with no house or barn apparent upon the empty fields, a fearful shock appalled the travellers. The chaise rocked violently, and almost upset as it came to an abrupt halt. The carriage following was pulled up barely in time to avoid a collision, the heavy baggage train was checked in its turn. Sir Robert leapt to the ground, and was alarmed to observe the near leader struggling furious upon the *pavé*, to which the blundering postillion had thrown him, while that varlet, unhappily immune from the broken limbs that were his due, struggled to his feet and attempted to hold the plunging off-leader, who stamped and pulled in mad terror at the fate of his companion. With difficulty was the fallen animal brought trembling to his feet, and

BELINDA

when at last this was accomplished, the fullness of the disaster was apparent. Not only was it clear that the poor beast's power to continue his functions was at end—blood stained his broken knees, and he was hopelessly lame—but the traverse of the vehicle was broken and, in the shock, had wrecked the supports of the front axle.

The Squire, as he cut the traces and released the suffering steed, showered upon the clumsy fool before him such epithets of abuse drawn from the vocabulary of the camp, and caught from his revered tutor in his teens, that the Gallic victim marvelled, even in his terror, where an Englishman could have acquired so intimately the vocabulary of the Old Guard. Then, recalling the necessities of the moment, he gave orders. He had the remaining horses unharnessed from the chaise; the last two carriages drawn up by the roadside, and with careful eye scanned all the countryside for succour.

BELINDA

I have said that no habitation was apparent. But upon a more careful scrutiny, he could discern, beyond a dense group of trees at the end of a cross road, some lines of a high roof, which he rightly judged to be those of a noble mansion. His decision was instantly taken. Much though it jarred upon his high breeding to violate the privacy of an equal, he must appeal in person as best he might to the owners of the Demesne, and trust to their sympathy with a Gentleman for the necessary loan of a horse that might complete the stage to Montrool. Bidding his valet mount guard over the ladies, and conjuring the postillions with the most dreadful menaces to maintain their post, he strode off to cover the half-mile which separated him from the Château.

Arrived, he was received with solemn courtesy by a stately major-domo, whose sumptuous livery witnessed to the greatness of the

BELINDA

family he served, and who had grasped at once, with trained eye, the rank of the visitor. The Baronet, careful of French custom, asked what house he had the honour of entering, presented his *carte de visite*, and begged that it might be taken to the master of the house as from an English Gentleman whose family and train had met with an accident upon the highway and who craved assistance.

'I will at once acquaint Madame,' replied the other, with an obeisance. 'As for our house, it is known as the Château de Rosny, and my mistress's name is the Marquise de la Ferronnière.' He motioned with a sweep of the hand to a neighbouring apartment where the distinguished guest might await his hostess, when he saw with surprise that the Englishman did not, for the moment, move; for Sir Robert was leaning, with his left hand pressed open upon a pillar, as one that had received a heavy blow and would recover

BELINDA

breath. He collected himself with an effort, advanced into the neighbouring apartment, and sank into a chair beside a table, with his head supported on his hand. Almost would he have recalled his card, but the major-domo had already gone.

They err who pretend that the years, though they may obscure, can eliminate a primal passion. The soul is immortal. If once it suffer the imprint of that one emotion which links time with eternity, the imperishable mark remains. The flood will return in full, unconquerable might, provoked by a tone, a scent, a glance, a name. This man, so far advanced in the business of living, already conscious of the grave, had suffered a resurrection from the dead. He had heard the name of Ferronnière.

All was unreal about him. The transition was too sudden, the surge of life too high. He heard a voice, he rose and trembled, the

BELINDA

great doors were ceremoniously opened, and the woman appeared.

* * * *

The ladies had not waited long. The Baronet was seen advancing across the fields, and at his side two lackeys, one of whom led a grand horse of the Berrichon breed. The keen eye of Miss Hackman, the filial affection of Belinda, each noted in Sir Robert's gait a new deliberation, and his head was bowed.

'My darling,' he began in an altered voice '(Cousin, forgive me, I should have helped you to alight . . . I am distracted). My darling, come with me.' He turned upon her a long regard. 'We must come to the Château. . . . There you shall be refreshed and recover from the trepidations of this adventure. Cousin, come with us. The Lady who there presides . . .' he paused. He had difficulty in continuing. He conquered himself and proceeded, 'The Chatelaine insists, with

BELINDA


high generosity (she is of English birth), in offering us the shelter of her roof till our means of transport shall be repaired. Mr. Atkins, pray follow with the others. These honest fellows will harness, and all is to be driven to . . . to our hostess's *manège*—all shall be entertained.'

So went they back to the great house. Miss Hackman wondered, but was wisely silent in the presence of her relative's strange emotion. Belinda, with simple trust, smiled lovingly upon her father and took his arm. 'Thank you, dear papa,' she whispered for his ear alone. 'I shall be grateful for rest. I fear the accident has moved me more than I knew.'

He put his hand on hers and slackened his pace to spare her steps. The house stood wide open to the summer air for their reception, and the three entered together by its ancient gates.



X

 HE presentations had been made, the Baronet, with the restraint of a forgotten world, had formally pronounced the name of their generous hostess to his daughter, who had dropped, as the occasion demanded, a deep reverence in honour of that commanding but gracious presence. Next Miss Hackman had been greeted with the kindest words, and even the Reverend Mr. Atkins had been accosted with so much *savoir faire*, such due respect for his cloth, as might have deceived an onlooker with the illusion of a conversation between equals.

BELINDA

The heat of that deep afternoon had stilled the very leaves upon the poplar trees; all was steeped in the drowsy summer haze. Above, Miss Hackman, in her room, permitted herself (what was rare with her) some relaxation in *déshabillé*. Below, in a boudoir where the finest canvasses of Boucher challenged the exquisite sensibility of Greuze, Sir Robert and the Marquise told each other all. She learnt that story of his long fidelity, his late marriage, his widowhood, his only child. He, her life at Court and in diplomacy (of which echoes had reached him in the intervals of the wars), and of the long retirement here at Rosny, since the great gentleman who had given her his name had left the Court of Louis XVIII for that of Heaven.

She gave him details of her household, wherein she begged that for some little space they might reside, even mentioning her recent reception of a brave young Englishman who had been wounded in her defence, who for

BELINDA

the moment was riding out in the forest, but would for dinner be returned. His name she had deliberately refused to require, but that he was of high birth she could be sure, and that his company would please them she made no doubt. His wound was wholly healed; in a few days he also (she sighed) would be gone.

In the *petit salon* upon the ground floor in the western wing of the house, Belinda, reposing in a *chaise-longue*, restored her serenity from the agitations of the day.

Into the court of the *manège*, by the offices near the *basse-cour*, the young rider dismounted, threw the reins to a groom, and advanced with leisured steps towards the house. He noted with surprise the newly arrived vehicles, the number of horses in the stables, the strange servants mixing with those of the household. He prepared to meet visitors, and for that purpose strode to the *Salon d'honneur*. Its gilded *fauteuils* were unoc-

BELINDA

cupied: the room was deserted, the great house silent. He rang, and at his summons a domestic appeared. He asked who might have arrived. The footman did not know their names; it was an English *Milord* and his suite who had met with a misadventure, and whom the Marquise was good enough to entertain while awaiting the repair of his equipage. He, his daughter, and another lady, some relative of his, would be present at dinner, and at least for that night. In his clear tones Horatio continued to inquire on the mishap, the man respectfully to reply.

Those tones were heard! From the *chaise-longue* wherein she reclined, Belinda started with a wild surmise. She sprang to her feet, she listened, she was assured. . . . It was, it was the beloved voice!

Oh! Heavens! Incredible! Here? Here in a foreign land? By what miracle . . . ? But steps approached. He would in a moment be at the door. The enormity of his

BELINDA

conduct, the violence of her pristine passion, engaged in mortal conflict.

A trembling seized Belinda. She mastered it. Her frame was in such a tumult of wounded pride (and of, alas! what tenderness!) that she could barely compose herself for that which every rule of female deportment demanded she should perform.

He entered. He checked himself. He stood still as a stone. Those eyes looked on her again. But they looked on her with disdainful pride. That form stood once more before her, living, real, but with an erect carriage of inward anger which, though restrained by the strength of lineage, informed his whole frame.

'Sir!' (she first spoke—and with an icy intensity) 'We meet again.' 'Madam!' he answered, on a grave and solemn note, 'we meet again.'

'I ask,' ran Belinda's measured tones, 'no explanation of your conduct. I have forgot-

BELINDA

ten it. But I am grateful indeed that your lack of all chivalric feeling has saved me from an uncongenial fate.'

'Nor will I seek an explanation of your words,' he replied in his turn, inclining his head sedately. 'I make no reproaches to a woman. When I found my poor letters unworthy of reply . . .' He stood back, every pulse of his beating heart demanded the beloved, but pride had the greater power.

'*Your* letters!' cried Belinda. '*I*—it was *I*—ah, Heaven! that I should have thus demeaned myself!—It was *I* that penned in vain those two successive billets to your direction, and was rewarded for my folly by your silence, your contempt, your departure!'

A wild glance of confusion and dawning discovery lighted the dark eyes of Horatio. An eager doubt mixed more and more with joy illumined the heavenly blue of Belinda's shining orbs. Each hesitated, each simultaneously exclaimed:

BELINDA

'What! You wrote? You wrote, and I never knew?'

'What! You did not hear? You could not guess?'

'Ah,' cried he in sudden passion with arms outstretched, 'my Belinda—nay, I will use that phrase—forgive the wretch who doubted—who dared to doubt—your divine loyalty, your unfailing heart! Would that I had perished by my own hand ere I stooped to admit such treason to my breast!' Thereat he fell upon one knee, with bowed head, and his lovely partner—Reader! Impute it not to immodesty in a tender Virgin—gently laid her hand upon his hair and murmured: 'Horatio . . .'

At this very moment Sir Robert and the Marquise entered in search, the one of his daughter, the other of her guest.

'Zounds!' cried the Baronet, rooted to the spot by the spectacle before him.

'*Tiens!*' murmured the Marquise, as she



Impute it not to immodesty in
a tender virgin.

BELINDA

surveyed the couple amusedly through a long *lorgnon* of the purest gold which she held to her eyes with head thrown back in all the *nonchalance* of the *bien née*.

* * * *

The weeks are past: the bridal day approaches. The date which has been fixed for the union is near at hand. Sir Robert and his hostess, in conference, were discussing all plans and details, opening the one to the other their roles in this affair.

'I had hesitated,' confessed the Baronet, 'to sanction these young people's alliance when first my daughter confided to me the secret of her heart. 'Tis I that am to blame for all that followed. My worldly mind designed for her a partner—now happily deceased—who would have proved most criminally unworthy, but who (so I imagined) would give her a greater place in our society. For this son of my old friend Maltravers is of narrow means:

BELINDA

indeed, of a substance insufficient even to maintain his ruined house. I should have remembered my own ample fortune and the nature of a woman's heart; but I was engrossed with terrestrial considerations, and so I sinned. Heavily have I been punished.'

'Fear nothing, Robert,' replied his companion. 'My decision, gradually formed, has now for many days been fixed. I had long determined to adopt, if I could so persuade him, and to make my heir the youth whom Providence had sent beneath my lonely roof. The movement was not precipitate. During the days of his convalescence I marked his manly step, his ingenuous regard. I dwelt upon his air of true gentility, the fire of his generous impulse, the restraint of his converse in a woman's presence, the assiduous care with which he would attend inferiors and superiors alike. Here (said I) is an occasion advanced by the all-seeing Providence of the Creator! For years I have re-

BELINDA

mained secluded, denied the conversation of my countrymen. Before God!' (she exclaimed vehemently) 'I have seen no true gentleman since the return of your prisoners in '14! And whom should I make my heir? I have no child!' (her voice trembled). 'The late Marquis . . .'

Her companion could not refrain from an imperceptible gesture of sympathy, but the ardent woman continued: 'The years pass. Did I delay, caprice might divert my judgment, old age corrupt it. I have chosen the inheritor of my vast wealth—I have chosen,' she repeated, emphatically, with pride, 'and I have chosen well.'

'I doubt it not, Esmeralda.'

Heartily did the Baronet thank Heaven in his heart (that night in his chamber upon his knees) for the singular mercy his Creator had shown to the devoted object of his daughter's affections. Bitterly did he reproach himself, as he prayed, for the disdain he had felt for

BELINDA

Horatio's former poverty. Nor could he now murmur his name at the Throne of the Almighty without the respect due to so considerable an increase in the young man's station among the gentry of the county.

But these were the later exercise of his retirement. Now, ere the fall of the day, another matter concerned him. He would approach it. It was the settlement of their affairs when the bride should have returned from her brief absence with her husband, and all should depart together for England. He learned, to his profound satisfaction, that Madame de la Ferronnière would accompany them. She proposed to pass the greater part of the year in their neighbourhood. She inquired whether a Dower House were not to be obtained on his estate. Montgomery could refrain no longer.

'Esmeralda!' he exclaimed, 'may we not seal those early vows of ours now at last, at once, and for ever? To you it was—to you



"ZOUNDS/" cried the Baronet.
"TIENS/" murmured the Marquise.



BELINDA

and to none other—that my youth burnt in an incense of adoration, and to-day the same consuming worship stands unalterably true. Yes, now, before me, the very turn of your rejecting hand recalls your gesture in my twentieth year.’

So spake he with the pardonable fervour of a man who for the moment was in another world.

As is the way with women, she preferred a devious reply.

‘Do you remember, Robert, oh! do you remember,’ she began, ‘that night in May when we wandered in the gardens during intervals of the dance at my mother’s villa upon the Thames at Putney? Then did we first know dimly what we now know too well.’

‘I remember,’ he answered with falling eyes.

‘Do you remember,’ she continued, ‘the lawn sloping down to the majestic stream, the

BELINDA

lights upon the dark waters, and how, as you gazed upon them, you bade me with some melancholy remember that the waters flow out for ever and return no more? It was in that same night that first you called me by my name.'

'By your name, Esmeralda? That name still rings like a chime of magic bells in my poor heart. My being implores, demands. . . .' In his eagerness he had risen, and stretched forth his hands. She, too, rose and held them clasped in her own.

'Let us not add to these words, my dear, my very dear,' the gracious, aged voice replied, 'nor tempt that Power in Whose Omnipotence lie alike our griefs and our loves. We have been living once again, in a brief moment of reminiscence, a long-dead youth, but our habitation is now fixed in age. Its tedium, its backward gaze upon the past, may be shared in friendship. But the sanctity of that friendship will be the better preserved if

BELINDA

we speak no more upon the matter which stirred us both like music—long ago; if we pursue no more that road which, a life-time since, was closed on us by Providence. We may, without peril, be companions, our lives adjoining yet unfettered; for the rest that seeming-far, that decorous relation can well sustain us, nor injure the prospect of the living, nor anger our dead, nor ape the irrecoverable days that never can return.'

'You are right,' he said.

She gently released his hands. He offered her his arm. Together they walked out in the dignity of years down the great avenue of limes; and, as they went, it seemed as though a mellowness of autumn had touched the summer light.

From an open casement of the Château the young people observed their elders thus formally advancing along the *allée*, engaged, apparently, in some talk well pleasing to them,

BELINDA

and finding a welcome recreation in each other's companionship.

'Oh, look! Horatio!' Belinda cried. 'Papa has by now made fast friends with the Marquise!'

'He has, indeed, I am glad to say,' answered her lover, as he turned from throwing them a careless glance to fix his eyes most ardently upon the object before him.

'I must call them in,' she said. 'They are so deep in talk that they will forget the hour when the table is prepared.'

'I will await your return,' he answered. He took her hand a moment as she turned to go. He bent over it in silence, longing with all his soul for the morrow and the hour when the hymeneal knot should permit him to press his lips to hers.

* * * *

That evening at a spinet, which gracefully adorned with its ancient form the room in

BELINDA

which Youth and Age were assembled, Belinda sang at her hostess's request a simple old Court song, the leaves of which Horatio successively reversed with adoring hand:

Madame la Marquise
Votre pied est bien fait,
Votre taille est bien mise,
Et votre bras parfait.

Mais songe toute belle
Que peut-être a l'instant
Notre grande Isabelle
Reviendra du Couvent!

*Adieu! les succès à la Cour
Il faut que chacun ait son tour.
Adieu! les succès à la Cour
Il faut que chacun ait son tour!*

The song continued. The lady's *riposte* gave equal tribute to the Marquis, but bade him also remember that:

BELINDA

. . . peut-être a l'instant
Notre grand Alexandre
Revient du régiment.

And in the *finale* the moral was drawn in
reconciliation:

Je crois voir ta tournure
Marquise à dix-huit ans!
Je crois voir ton allure
Marquis, dans ton printemps!
Adieu! les succès à la cour.

So the song ended, and the last night fell
upon that chequered wooing which now was
reaching haven.

* * * *

The early summer dawn rose, grew splendid over the rim of the world, and waxed effulgent in the luminous arch of heaven. Belinda woke. From her opened windows,

BELINDA

which looked upon the east, she watched enthralled the broadening of the light.

All was still. The living things of that abundant soil lay hushed in preparation and attendance: the venerable trees, the lawns, the corn that ripened for harvest, beyond the woodlands far away. A gentle mist hardly concealed in its benediction the stretches where it lay, and something of enlargement and of birth was brooding over all. The generative earth lay in an ecstasy of expectation for her lord the sun.

Belinda extended her pure arms as though in antique prayer, and raised to the now radiant skies a face transfigured by that mighty influence which enkindles life universal. It was her wedding morning.

As she stood thus, immobile, the first strong shaft of light shot upwards, struck the turret heights, burned through the embrasured firmament, and it was day . . . She dropped her hands, her head, and turned

BELINDA

back to slumber. Even as she so turned, she saw—or did she see?—against the trees, for one fleeting moment, a saffron robe. Had she perceived them, had they vanished, the features of that lady from overseas who had smiled on her with eyes almost maternal in the fields of home? . . . All the long hours till her attendants came to attire her lovely limbs for bridal Belinda slept beatified.

* * * *

In the room which had been set aside for the chapel of the ceremony, and recently furnished by the Chatelaine for that purpose with assiduous care, the household was assembled, the Reverend Mr. Atkins vested and prepared. He had required, he had demanded, he had obtained, a glass of port wine and a biscuit, which it was his invariable custom to consume before a Celebration in protest against the Romish novelties of certain colleagues. As, with practised intona-

BELINDA

tion, he recited the profound phrases of the Marriage Service, the Marquise, who had missed for so long the beautiful Liturgy of her youth, was deeply moved; while old Fanchette, the only French domestic not a Papist and, therefore, privileged to attend, was equally affected by the sacred scene, though, being ignorant of the English tongue (a Huguenot from the Vaudois), she could do no more than reverently follow the rhythms of the sacred office.

Averse though he was to the extempore usage of the Caledonian Communion, Mr. Atkins did not forbear to add at the end of his ministration a short but heartfelt prayer of his own for the young people, who would eventually unite in their combined patronage the two livings of Halston and Marlden. Tears stood in the eyes of the good old man as he alluded with a native delicacy to the possibility of offspring. Himself a celibate, and, therefore (as we must believe), un-

BELINDA

blessed with children (for the emoluments of his office were insufficient to a matrimonial venture), the more pathetically did he extend both hands in benediction over the bowed heads of the kneeling couple, while his uplifted eyes sought Heaven in a prayer for their fruitful happiness.

* * * *

Such, gentle reader, were the loves of Belinda and Horatio; tried as by fire, torn asunder, rejoined, they attained at last to wedded felicity under an ancestral roof, until, after the brief accidents of this our mortality, they were united forever in Paradise.

FINIS



NEW YORK

Publishers of BOOKS and of
HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Established 1817





T 69640